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JOHN CREASEY

A DR. PALFREY SUSPENSE-ADVENTURE

The Blight

The agents of Z5 fight to save the world from a disease that threatens all life!

Originally published in hardcover by Walker and Company

THE STORM

The agents of Z5 were clustered around the local law officers and the men from the Department of the Interior. Ascheim, the German, stared at a stand of Douglas fir.

"They are as healthy as any in the Black Forest."

"They're rotten," said Rakowitz, weary. "The first wind will carry them all over."

The men looked at each other uneasily, and then up at the darkening skies. The wind was rising even then. Winstanly went up to a giant, at least 165 feet high and five feet around. He leaned against it, and then pushed, as hard as he could.

The crack which followed was deafening, and the tree toppled slowly, a thick cloud of dust rising into the air.

Palfrey looked toward the far end of the valley. The thunder and rain came suddenly, without warning . . . and the forest began to die.

"The world's whole sap is sunk:
The general balm th' hydroptic earth hath drunk"
John Donne

The Blight

John Creasey

LANCER BOOKS NEW YORK

A LANCER BOOK

THE BLIGHT

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LANCER BOOKS, INC. • 1560 BROADWAY
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10036

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CHAPTER 1

The Chalet

As far as the eye could see, there were Christmas trees.

On the crest of Wenceslaus Hill, where the log-built chalet stood, was a large map of the whole range, hill and valley, rock and forest, telling a story which fascinated most people who climbed so far. The map was seven feet wide and three feet deep, supported by two posts made of weather-darkened pine, each post driven deep into the ground. Over the map was a shallow roof, erected partly to save the climbers from the fierce rays of the sun, partly to protect the colours of the map from bleaching, and partly to prevent reflection from the protective glass surface.

This morning the sun's rays shone low from a gap in the eastern mountains turning the glass to a vivid sheet of flame. This fiery glow touched everything nearby: the windows of the chalet, the outside showers, the benches of rough hewn logs, the railing of knotty pine which protected the edge of the clearing. Beyond the clearing was a sheer drop of over two hundred feet, falling to sharp granite rocks below.

On these rocks sprawled the body of a man.

At this hour, it lay in shadow. Anyone standing at the railing and looking down, might have difficulty in seeing that it was a body, but to the knowledgeable it would have been deduced at once, for the buzzards hovered, great serrated wings spread, swooping and

gliding with a grace too beautiful for such a macabre purpose—to pick clean the bones of the dead man.

Smaller birds, blue jays and sparrows, flitted among the trees and in the wide crevices of the rocks, chipmunks came out hopefully, darting from crumb to crumb left the previous night by the young couple now asleep in the chalet.

Only the young or the very hardy climbed up to Wenceslaus Hill to see the panorama of Christmas Valley.

Except for the noises of birds and insects, animals and the wind, there was silence at the crest of the hill and over the whole valley. The river, Christmas River, was far enough away to appear only as a narrow ribbon. Two small tributaries, their sources winter's snow, ran into it. Here and there were clearings where the rangers and the forest workers lived in villages which could boast churches and schools and even a movie theatre and lecture hall, for although there was no single village where more than thirty people lived, the population of the valley was rising, and within it over three hundred families lived and thrived. The land was fertile when it was cleared, and the valley self-supporting, for the high mountains surrounding Christmas Valley cut it off completely from November until April. Stocks of food and supplies were kept in mammoth caves in the sides of the rocky walls—caves below the spit where the man lay sprawled and still.

There were estimated to be a hundred million trees in Christmas Valley. Most of these were Douglas fir, but there were spruce and pinyon pine and larch, and stands of other trees—the Christmas trees from which the valley got its name.

As the sun rose, the fire in its rays failed, and in the valleys mist formed, pale and translucent at first but

becoming thicker and whiter until it hid the river. The mist seemed to add to the silence as it crept up the mountainside towards the dead man. Even the buzzards were shrouded by it; one, more venturesome or instinctively more knowing than the rest swooped down and disappeared.

Others followed . . .

Inside the chalet, Deidre Thomas was the first to wake. She heard an unfamiliar sound, a rhythmic noise coming from a corner of the sleeping room with its bunk beds and hammocks, sleeping-bags and recumbent figures. The snoring came from a man named Harmon whom she had met the night before, a big sandy-haired man whom she had not taken to. His mouth was open and he lay on his back.

Closer to her, lay Clive.

The rule here was that the men should sleep on one side of the room, the girls on the other; Clive was thus out of reach. The drapes dividing the room for modesty's sake, had been pushed back by the last to bed—Harmon—and Clive was opposite her. His face was turned towards the rough-hewn wall and she could only see the back of his head and one arm outside the blankets. She wished he would turn round, so that her eyes could caress his face, feature by feature. She felt a strong, compelling urge to go to him.

Well, why not?—He was her husband.

She lay in a half-dream of love, willing him to turn to her. It was Harmon who at last turned heavily. The movement made Deidre look at the bunk beneath him, and she saw that it was empty, the sleeping-bag gaping at the top, like some secret half-revealed.

So Johnny Woll had gone out; perhaps the opening and the closing of the door had woken her. She looked

at the door, remembering how they had been warned to drop the bar across it.

"If you don't," a forest ranger had said, "the chances are, that you'll wake up to find a grizzly in bed with you."

She had seen Harmon drop the wooden bar into the slots to fasten the door, and it was still in position. Puzzled, she raised her head. If Johnny Woll had gone out he couldn't have put the bar back into place.

Yes—it was still there.

She was being silly; one of the others must have fastened the door after Johnny had left.

It was daylight: a pink tinge brushing the glass of the two small windows above the men's bunks. Still puzzled, still trying to convince herself that what she had seen wasn't really strange, she heard Clive move. He turned over in his sleep, making a great fuss of it, and lay at last, facing her. Her heart gave an absurd leap, and she held her breath. He wasn't really handsome, not *handsome*, but even in sleep there was something so attractive, so friendly, so kind about his face. He had dark, wavy hair and dark eyebrows and lashes, yet he didn't always look unshaven, as so many dark men did. His mouth, beautifully shaped for a man's, was closed. He had a small, broad nose and big eyes; when they were open, their short, thick lashes seemed to hold an expression of interested surprise. That was Clive: he always wanted to find out; whatever it was, he wanted to know.

Oh, if only she could sneak across to him!

But it wasn't simply a matter of breaking the unwritten rules, it would be foolish. He looked so fast asleep and might sleep for an hour yet.

What time was it?

She turned slowly in her bed, which was of soft sponge rubber and very comfortable, and took her

tiny wedding present watch from a nail in the wall. She had to put it very close to her eyes to see that it was a quarter past six.

Not early, really; and she didn't feel like staying here much longer.

She pushed back the bedclothes and got out of bed. Shortie pyjamas, apple green in colour showed her nice legs, and with her fair hair and fresh complexion she looked very young and feminine. In fact she was twenty-three. She lowered herself without any noise and crossed to Clive; as she reached him he heaved himself over so that his back was towards her. She resisted a temptation to tickle the back of his neck or behind his ears. No, it was a pity to wake him. She walked bare-footed towards the door, still puzzled; someone *must* have secured the door after Johnny Woll had gone out.

No one stirred.

Deidre took the bar away from the sockets, rested it against the wall and opened the door gingerly, waiting for it to creak. It did not. She stepped outside—and shivered, for it was much colder than she had expected. There was a wrap, she knew, in the outside showers, and she went to fetch it, pulling it round her shoulders as she walked to the rail. The sight of the valley and those massed sentinels of trees on the hillsides awed her. Last night in the setting sun they had seemed touched with gold but now those which rose out of the mist were dark, almost black. The mist was dispersing, like a diaphanous cloak slowly withdrawn.

A bird sailed close to her. An eagle, she thought, before she realised what it was. She shuddered.

Then she noticed several others flying just below the level of the rail. She was of the city, having little knowledge of the country or the mountains, but she knew that when buzzards gathered it was a sign of

death. Was a bear dead somewhere below? Or a deer? Or a bird? Or one of those darling little chipmunks which had come timidly up to be fed last night?

Half fearful, yet drawn by a curiosity she could not stifle, she peered over the rail. At least six of the great birds were hovering close to the side of the mountain beneath her, and she remembered the ledge below. Johnny had talked jestingly of being saved by that if he fell.

She looked down into mist.

As the gust of wind sang along the valley, she saw more birds, one of them settling on the ledge; for a moment the mist lifted completely and she saw the spread-eagled body. On that first instant she knew who it was.

"Johnny!" she gasped. "Oh, Johnny!"

He had been so lively, so much the joker of the party and yet neither offensive nor a bore—just a quick-witted youth who could conjure up happiness with very little effort. A buzzard was actually perched on his shoulder.

"Go away!" she screamed. "Go away!"

She backed from the rail. Snatching up some small rocks, she began to hurl them down, and all the time she went on screaming: "Go away, go away!" The rocks flew wide, none of the birds took any notice of them or of her cries, and she turned in desperation towards the chalet.

The door opened and Harmon stepped out.

He wore a pair of khaki shorts but nothing else; and he carried a revolver. He looked ugly and bleary-eyed, but he moved with speed and silence.

"There's a body!" she gasped. "The buzzards!"

He looked at her searchingly, taking in the whole scene at a single sweeping glance; the carrion birds,

the mist, the patches of sunlight, the body in shadow. He pointed the gun downwards and suddenly the roar of a shot blasted the quiet. She saw chippings of stone fly from the rock close to Johnny Woll's head—and the bird perched there flew off. The others flew higher, too. He fired again and one of them seemed to stagger in flight; then it dropped like a stone. The clattering echo of the first shot was overtaken by the second; they seemed like the echoes of a dozen. Before the sound died, Clive came running from the chalet, pushing aside two girls clustering in the doorway.

"What is it?" Clive reached Deidre's side and as he put his arm round her, he glared at Harmon. "What are you shooting at?"

Harmon said laconically: "Sitting birds."

"What the devil do you mean?"

"Look," invited Harmon.

The girls came hurrying and all peered down—and were silenced. It seemed a long time before one of them, long-legged, black-haired Isobel said:

"He's dead."

"He's dead all right," Harmon agreed.

"How—?"

"He must have fallen over," the other girl declared. She was Pru; tiny, rosy-cheeked, blue-eyed, like a picture on a postcard; inconceivable to imagine tragedy touching her, yet her distress was very real.

"Fallen *over?*" echoed Deidre.

"Fallen?" echoed Clive.

"He must have done!" insisted Pru.

"But how?"

"The rail's waist high."

"He'd never lean that far over."

"He must have," Harmon said.

Clive asked: "Why 'must'?"

Deidre had never seen him quite like this before;

upright, stern-faced, almost challenging. The others seemed aware of this, too; aware of a conflict between Clive and Harmon. Stillness settled on Wenceslaus Hill, as over the wooded valley. No birds flew near except a blue jay, wing feathers flashing by like polished metal.

Harmon was a much bigger man than Clive; much huskier. His mop of close curls was almost unnatural —as if he had his hair crimped by a hairdresser. He was very fair, his eyes light grey, his lashes and eyebrows almost colourless. The pale freckles on the upper part of his face gave him a curiously bleached look. The gun, still in his right hand, was held negligently, yet Deidre was acutely aware of it. Suddenly she was afraid.

Clive repeated: "Why *must*, Harmon?"

"No one would throw him over," Harmon answered.

"Wouldn't they?"

It was like accusing a man of murder. Deidre saw Harmon stiffen, saw his big shoulders hunch, his fingers tighten on the gun. Before he answered, or Clive asked yet again, both the girls began to talk at once.

"Don't be silly, Clive."

"Clive you don't know what you're saying."

"Of course he fell over!"

"He must have done."

"He didn't fall over," Clive asserted. Deidre wanted to cry out, to order him to stop, she felt sure that if he went on he would provoke the other man to attack him. "Johnny Woll was afraid of heights; it was easy to see that, when he looked over the rail last night. I don't believe he fell down the side of that cliff. I believe he was pushed."

CHAPTER 2

The Ledge

To Deidre the silence which followed the last word was unbearably long, and in the silence the word itself seemed to echo and re-echo: "Pu-pu-pu-ush-ush-ed-ed-ed." At last it faded. Pru, biting her underlip, began to shiver, only partly with the chill of the morning. Isobel pushed her hair back from her forehead in a movement quite langorous although at the time almost certainly unconsidered.

What would Harmon say? What would Harmon *do?*

Harmon said in an unexpectedly reasonable voice: "If he was pushed, someone pushed him."

"That's right."

"So first we have to find out whether he was pushed —which I very much doubt—and if he was, we have to find out who pushed him."

Deidre thought desperately: "Don't keep it up Clive, please don't. For she was still afraid of the bigger man, and of his gun. It seemed to her that Clive was looking for a quarrel and that any quarrel would be madness, the odds were so much in Harmon's favour. The one good thing was Harmon's calmness, as if he were determined not to allow himself to be provoked. Why was Clive behaving so? He didn't *know* Johnny Woll; until last evening they had been strangers. He had come with Pru and Isobel, jesting:

"The man with two wives." Harmon had come alone.

"There are only five of us here. It shouldn't be difficult to find out if one of us pushed him."

Harmon said pleasantly: "Did you?"

"No."

"Deidre?"

"Listen to me, Harmon," Clive said harshly. "This isn't funny."

"I agree about that," Harmon said. He shifted his gaze from where the buzzards were beginning to hover again.

"The girls are out," Clive said.

Clive, don't keep needling him! Deidre wanted to scream.

"So that means you or me, on your reckoning," Harmon said.

"*I* didn't push him over."

Harmon said: "Nor did I." He moved away and drew his gun and fired at a buzzard; it dropped in flight. The shot echoed and re-echoed, clattering and reverberating.

Harmon turned back but did not pocket the gun.

"You're wrong in one thing," he stated flatly.

"What is that?"

"It could have been one of the girls."

"What kind of a man do you think you are?"

Clive, prayed Deidre, *oh Clive, don't keep on.*

"Just a man," answered Harmon, levelly. "Woll could have gone out of the chalet with one of them." He glanced at Deidre. "Which of course gives your wife a slight advantage."

"I didn't go out with anybody!" cried Pru.

"I certaintly didn't," said Isobel, sharply.

"Of course you would deny it," Harmon said. "If he were pushed—which I still doubt—whoever pushed him would have to deny it. So asking questions isn't

going to get us anywhere. Nor is refusing to face facts. Johnny was more likely to go out with one of the girls than with you or me. And he might look over the rail, necking with them, or even lean backwards against the rail. One push—and over he would go. The girl wouldn't have to be particularly strong . . ."

"Oh, it's horrible, horrible," Pru gasped.

"It's madness," Isobel said, stiffly.

"There's another possibility," remarked Harmon.

"What is it?" Clive barked.

Clive, please . . .

"He could have gone out to meet someone else."

"Up here, by night?"

"Why not?"

"You're crazy!"

"No," Harmon denied. "If anyone here is crazy, you are, for taking it for granted Johnny was pushed. He could have fallen."

"He must have had a reason for coming out here."

"I've suggested two: he was necking with one of the girls or he came out to meet someone he knew was up here. Forget it, Clive."

Clive . . .

As she spoke his name inside her mind, Deidre heard a different sound: an engine, not far off. The others heard it, too. An engine, a car, up here? it seemed absurd. Both men turned and looked towards the sound which came from a fire-break some distance below them. Harmon moved towards the rail and looked down, while the buzzards circled at a wary distance. The sun was bright and warming now and all but a few patches of mist had gone. The body lay on rock which now looked so pale that it was almost white.

The noise of the engine sounded louder.

Deidre joined Clive, her relief so great that she felt

sick. She took Clive's arm and found the muscles stiff, the tension still within him. Pru and Isobel, looking round distractedly, turned and walked towards the chalet. A jeep's broad nose loomed out of the trees, making for the crest of Wenceslaus Hill. Two rangers were in it; with their wide hats and pale green shirts, both looked smart and immaculate.

"Go and get dressed," Clive said to Deidre.

"I'm all right."

"You don't look all right!"

The jeep moved much closer, and the man next to the driver stared at Deidre, who suddenly turned towards the chalet without a word. She knew that Clive did not care what she looked like, he simply wanted her out of the way when he began to talk to these newcomers. The jeep stopped two or three yards away from the map, and both rangers got out. One carried a rifle, the other had a revolver in a holster in his belt. One from each side of the jeep, they seemed to bear down on Clive and Harmon.

The man with the rifle, short, square-shouldered, big hipped and surprisingly graceful of movement, drew close before he asked:

"Who's been shooting?"

"I have," Harmon answered.

"That's against the State laws."

"Not yet it isn't," Harmon said.

"To shoot game is—"

"I shot at buzzards," Harmon said, almost wearily. "A man fell to his death during the night and no one liked the idea of the buzzards picking his bones. There are people who think it's most hygienic, though," he added.

The other ranger, taller, younger, very lean-faced, moved quickly towards the rail, yet both men reached it at the same time. There was something almost comi-

cal in the way they bent their heads. Deidre, watching from the window, saw them turn round, but she could not hear what they said.

The chunky ranger asked: "What happened?"

"Mr. Thomas thinks he was pushed," Harmon said. "I think he fell. Can we get the body up?"

"The chunky ranger asked musingly, "Can we, Saul?"

The younger man answered: "We could go down to Snow Cave in the jeep and then along the ledge, Dave. It won't be easy and we'll need help."

"I'll help," Clive volunteered quickly.

"Will you, sir?" asked the ranger named David, turning to Harmon.

Harmon shook his head with sharp decision.

"You *won't?*" Clive ejaculated.

"No," said Harmon coolly. "I don't like walking along a narrow ledge even to save a live man and I certainly don't intend to risk my life saving a dead one. I'll give my support in the rear, if you like."

None of the others spoke until the ranger said gruffly: "That won't be necessary."

"Please yourself."

"But you'll stay up here, won't you?"

"Must I?"

"I would prefer you to wait until the sheriff's been."

"I've a better idea," Harmon said. "Let me go and get the sheriff."

Clive Thomas thought, they're behaving like fools, he'll never fetch the sheriff. He'll make himself scarce. As he thought this he was walking down the rough surface of the fire-break towards a stand of very tall Douglas firs. In between the trees he could see the sunlight. He was one of the three men walking, the

other two were lumber-jacks from the timber mill which was thinning out the forest. The rangers had gone ahead in the jeep, with ropes, first aid materials, and a canvas sheet. As these men stepped among the trees there was a sharp crack not far away, followed by the voice of the ranger named Saul.

"It's rotten, Dave."

"I can see it is."

"Never known anything like it."

"I've seen plenty," the older man said calmly. "Don't worry about a dead tree."

When the three men on foot reached the ledge, Clive Thomas stood still, astounded, appalled and marvelling. The mountainside dropped sheer from this spot, and overlooked one of the deepest parts of the valley. The river, six or seven thousand feet below, was cascading over rocks which looked small from this height but were in fact huge boulders. Nearby, water gushed like liquid silver out of a hole in the side of the mountain. There was a constant splashing and the roar of the waterfall out of sight.

At the edge of the stand of trees was a narrow ledge of rock. Venturing out on to this, Clive saw that it ran towards the cliffside and he guessed that directly above was the clearing and the chalet, but he could not see either. The rangers were making their way slowly along the ledge, close to the cliff, each heavily laden. The jeep stood among the trees. Its passage had been impeded by one tree which had snapped in two and fallen across the path. To Clive, this meant nothing. To the two lumber-jacks it seemed to mean a great deal. They moved towards it and examined the place where it had broken. Clive thought impatiently: "Why waste time?"

One of the men said: "It's a clean break."

"I can see it's clean."

"Dry as old dead wood."

"It *is* old dead wood."

"But this stand's healthy!"

"That tree's been dead a long time," insisted one of them.

Clive made himself say mildly: "Don't you think the rangers need help?"

"Why sure." They moved on, and one of the lumberjacks said: "You see that tree?"

"I saw the dead tree."

"I'll say it *was* dead."

"Is it—important?"

"Ever seen a healthy man struck down dead, mister?"

"A tree isn't a man," Clive protested.

"It's alive, it feeds, it breathes."

"Listen," Clive said, almost desperately, "we ought to catch up with those rangers."

"Oh sure."

Once they were on the ledge the two men moved with an easy assurance which shamed Clive. He pressed close against the cliff, more nervous of looking down than he had expected to be. He stared glassily at the two straight backs, without really hearing what was said, but aware that they were still talking about the broken tree.

As he rounded the corner Clive saw the two rangers bending over the body of Johnny Woll. For the first time he wanted to hurry, but there was no room to pass. He could see Dave feeling the other's pulse; what a waste of time that was, too! He saw Saul moving his hands about the fallen body, as if to find out if any bones were broken. Next the two men took a folding stretcher from their backs, extended it to its full length and then lifted Johnny Woll gently on to it.

"How'd he die?" asked one of the lumber-jacks.

"Looks as if he broke his neck," Dave answered.

"Any other sign of injury?"

"Fractures and cuts, but I guess the broken neck killed him," said Dave. "It's going to be more difficult getting back with the stretcher."

"We'll make it, don't you worry."

They strapped the dead man down, and stood up. One of the lumber-jacks went behind, the other stayed just in front of the rangers who carried the stretcher. Clive walked ahead, kicking small rocks and dead wood over the ledge so as to make it easier for the others to follow. He drew close to the spot where the trees abutted on the rocky ledge. Here several big pieces of dead wood were obviously dangerous, and he leaned against a tree as he kicked them over.

He heard a crack.

He felt the trunk give.

In a moment of horror he snatched his arm from the tree and flung himself away from the dangerous edge. He heard another, louder crack; in front of his eyes the tree against which he had leaned broke in two. It was a hundred feet high at least and was broken only four or five feet from the base. The ninety feet or so of the branch-laden tree simply toppled over and crashed down. A thin cloud of dust was caught in shafts of bright sunlight.

Stupidly, Clive stared about him.

And he saw the expressions of shocked horror on the faces of the rangers and the lumber-jacks; they were appalled far more by the fate of the tree than by the death of Johnny Woll.

CHAPTER 3

The Brittle Trees

Ranger David Kellman had been in the Foresty Service since his High School days, and he was now forty-nine. Never in the whole course of his life had he known such a phenomenon. Dry twigs could always be snapped with very little pressure; big branches, if they were dry and rotten enough, could be broken between hands or snapped across the knee —but for healthy, growing trees to be as fragile as this was appalling.

The youth had merely leaned against the tree—against one of the giants in the forest—and it had gone toppling down the face of the cliff.

Ranger Saul Harris, fifteen years younger, had a much better technical education and his theoretical knowledge far surpassed Kellman's; he was an expert in tree diseases and parasites, and trees were the whole purpose of his existence. It was Kellman, who saw the pallor of the youth's face, who had the bigger shock.

"Go back to the jeep," he called.

The young man nodded. As he walked, slowly and deliberately, he suddenly slipped on a smooth rock. Instinctively he put his hand out to support himself against a tree, but snatching it away before it touched the trunk, went staggering, and only just saved himself from a fall.

He reached the jeep, and stood waiting for the lit-

tle party to approach. They maneuvered the stretcher carefully, then secured it by tying canvas straps to rings at the side. The underbelly of the stretcher was on thick foam rubber supports, to prevent jolting. The head of the dead man was blood-stained; smears streaked across his cheeks and his chin. There was an ugly gash on his right temple.

He looked more as if he had been in a fight than in a fall.

The two Forestry Rangers lowered the screens at the back and then joined the lumber-jacks who stood staring over that mass of trees. The tops of many of them were aflame with sunlight now, others were still dark and shadowy and sinister.

The two men, big, burly, unshaven, wearing patched jeans and checked lumber-jackets, turned towards the rangers; there was a shocked expression in their eyes.

Kellman said: "Wait."

He walked from this narrow clearing towards the stand of trees, a pigmy beneath giants, the least of which was a hundred and fifty feet tall. Over the years they had been thinned out, soon many of these were to be felled. The ground was softened by needles; moss patterned the lower part of the trunks and those roots which were above the ground. They stood some twenty feet apart in straight rows whichever way one looked.

Deliberately Kellman approached a tree which had an enormous girth. It was close to the fire-brake, a hundred yards from the jeep. He studied it for what seemed a long time, then placed both hands against it and pushed—even the little crowd by the jeep could see that he did not exert much pressure.

The tree cracked, sharp and loud as a pistol shot.

It toppled.

It fell across the fire-break, and as the bigger branches touched the earth they, too, cracked and split, flying in all directions. The main trunk thudded to the ground and broke, not into two or three but into dozens, hundreds, of pieces. Pale dust rose like incense from a funeral pyre.

After the tree had fallen, many birds flew hither and thither squawking in alarm; small animals scuttled to safety, and in the distance a black bear lumbered away in alarm. When all the noises had settled there was utter silence; not one of the men spoke for a long time. A lumber-jack opened his mouth, but no words came.

Kellman turned away and approached the jeep slowly. The sun, shining indifferently on his face, showed his appalled expression of disbelief. His footsteps sounded very loud and clear.

A lumber-jack said hoarsely:

"They were all right—two days ago. I *know* they were."

"Two days?" Kellman echoed.

"Are you sure?" demanded Saul Harris.

"We was through here," the other lumber-jack insisted, spitting dust from his mouth. A green butterfly settled on one of the scarlet squares in the checkerboard pattern of his jacket. He was sweating. "Weren't we, George?"

"We were through here right enough," the other confirmed.

"The trees were O.K. then."

"They couldn't have been," Saul Harris objected.

"They were all right, I tell you."

"God knows what's caused this," Kellman said. "It's —uncanny."

"We've got to stop it," Harris said tautly. "Quick."

"We've got to find out how far it spreads." Kell-

man's voice was very harsh; he looked ill. "We've got a lot to do. Take the body down to the village, see the people at the chalet, talk to the sheriff and start a survey in the valley. We've got to find out how far this tree rot goes."

He began to move very fast, as if he knew there was not a minute to waste, and soon the jeep moved down the fire-break towards the Forestry Headquarters.

When they reached there the sheriff had already left for the chalet on the top of Wenceslaus Hill. Harmon had come for him.

"I didn't think he would fetch the sheriff," Clive Thomas said.

"I know you didn't," Deidre answered, and added after a pause: "Why don't you like him?"

"Do *you* like him?"

"I don't hate him, as you do."

"Hate? Don't be crazy. I just think he killed Johnny Woll."

"But *why* do you think so?" Deidre demanded.

"You've told me the bar was across the door when you woke," said Clive. "So someone must have gone out with him and then come in again and fastened the door."

"I didn't tell you that until after you had shown your dislike; beside, they needn't have gone out, they could just have let him out, and dropped the bar into position afterwards."

Clive said wearily: "All right, all right, so I don't like Harmon and I'm prejudiced. There's one thing you don't know," he added. "I can't make up my mind whether to tell the sheriff about it or not."

"What don't I know?" demanded Deidre, uneasily.

"Harmon and Johnny Woll had a hell of a quarrel last night," Clive stated flatly.

"I didn't hear anything," protested Deidre sharply. "Are you sure?"

"They were outside," Clive said. "They kept their voices down but they acted as if they could kill each other. If I tell the sheriff—" he broke off.

"If they really quarrelled the sheriff ought to be told," Deidre admitted reluctantly.

Sheriff Pike was small, gnarled, gnome-like. Everything about him seemed old—except his piercing blue eyes, which told of a keen intelligence and a man who missed very little.

He listened intently.

"You were right to tell me," he approved. "Thank you, Mr. Thomas."

"Is there—is there any evidence that Johnny was murdered?" Clive asked.

"So far there isn't any evidence of anything except that he fell and broke his neck," the sheriff answered. "How long do you intend to stay in the forest, Mister?"

"We'd thought—two or three days."

"Why don't you write out what you've just told me, put your address on top, sign it, and then leave?" the sheriff suggested. "I don't think Christmas Valley is going to be a good place for a walking vacation."

Two hours later they set out along the only road into the valley, in the five-year-old Volkswagen which held everything they possessed. They had come eagerly and in happiness, and left uneasy and afraid; and as they turned and looked back at the valley it seemed to them that trees were toppling and cracking everywhere, filling the air with an unnatural dust.

"He could have jumped," Sheriff Pike said to Harmon.

Harmon towered over him, more than a head taller.

"You think it might have been suicide?"

"It could have been," reasoned the sheriff. "And it looks as if I've plenty to do without finding out. How long do you plan to stay in the valley?"

"For as long as I can be useful."

"You can be plenty useful," said the sheriff drily. "In the past two hours I've had word that trees have collapsed in seven different stands of timber. It looks as if this blight has hit the whole valley. The rangers and the local people have more than enough to do but I want all vacationers out. *Out*, I said. You can help get them out, starting with those two girls who came up with the dead man. Look," the sheriff went on, and he led the way to a smaller map similar to the one on Wenceslaus Hill. "You see the trails . . . Where there's a roof sign, there's a chalet. You can take a mini-jeep and go to all the chalets, collect anyone you find and bring them right back here. We'll have a bus leaving for Townsville"—he pointed to a red circle at the eastern edge of the map—"every two hours. Will you do this?"

"Yes. There's one problem."

"One out of hundreds. Have you any particular problem in mind?"

"A lot of the tourists will be out walking in the forest by now."

"They usually stick to the main trails—foot or vehicular. The season's hardly begun. You've got a full-time job, but you can do it."

"Do I get any help?"

"Find your own help. I'll supply the mini-jeep."

"Right," Harmon said, as if he had decided not to argue any further.

"Mr. Harmon—"

"Yes."

"You've seen what happens to the trees."

"Yes," Harmon said. "I was looking down from the hill."

"Those trees can weigh up to twenty tons. One branch alone can weigh up to a ton. Plenty less than that can break a man's skull if it falls on him."

Harmon said: "I know there's danger. Are there any steel helmets in the village?"

"Yeh."

"I'll take some."

"I'll fix it. And Mr. Harmon . . ."

"Yes?"

Don't smoke. Don't let anybody smoke, These rotten trees are tinder dry."

Harmon said gruffly: "So a treee can fall and kill, and a cigarette can start a fire which will burn us all to death. Are you going to evacuate the village?"

"I'm waiting for word from the County authorities. Meanwhile I'm evacuating the valley this side of the Canyon of All Seasons. There are rangers who will tell the tourists what to do, but that will be incidental. You're in charge."

"Thanks. One more question."

"Yes?"

"Do you know how many tourists are in the valley?"

"Twenty-seven registered at Administration Headquarters last night. Say another dozen didn't register."

Harmon nodded and turned away. Soon he was at the wheel of a small green-painted jeep. A youth came out carrying a stack of steel helmets which he dumped in the back. On the seat of the jeep was a small scale map showing all the foot and bridle paths as well as the hunting and service roads in the forest.

Harmon started off along a wide street with ranch-type houses on either side. Sheriff Pike moved slowly towards the administration building which was in the

centre of the village. The building housed not only the ranger force for the valley but a museum and several departments including the fire-fighting headquarters. The big hall had an enormous relief map under glass, and as the sheriff went in he saw four rangers lifting a section of the glass off the map. Rakowitz, the Head Ranger, tall, grey-haired, aloof, was talking to other men at the far end of the room. Exhibits and photographs were displayed round the walls, telling of the prehistoric peoples who had lived in the forest, giving evidence of dinosauric remains, of fossils from paleolithic times which showed that even the highest point in these mountains had been under the sea millions of years before. None could doubt the great pride the rangers took in the valley.

On one wall were polished sections of trees, cut across near the base. One enormous piece, over a yard across, was marked in a dozen places, the most central one of which said:

"*200 years B.C. Tree's first year.*"

One halfway from the centre was marked: "*1066—Norman Conquest.*"

Another was marked: "*1215—Magna Carta signed.*"

Still another said: "*1771—Revolutionary War began.*"

Yet another, close to the edge: "*1861—Civil War began.*"

None of the men in the room took the slightest notice of these exhibits. Rakowitz turned towards the sheriff and said: "We've had fourteen reports already. We're going to mark the map with red-headed pins to show where brittle trees have been located."

"You know what I think?" asked Sheriff Pike.

"What do you think?"

"That there are brittle trees everywhere in the

forest and there soon won't be a sound one left in the Valley."

Rakowitz said in an almost inaudible voice: "How can we stop it spreading? *How?*"

CHAPTER 4

Dr. Palfrey

Dr. Stanislaus Alexander Palfrey, known to his friends as Sap, sat in his office in the heart of London's Mayfair. It was not only in the heart but in the bowels of Mayfair, being several hundred feet below ground. It was the third 'safe' headquarters of Z5, of which he was chief. He seldom came down in the lift from the hotel above without a half-smile of amusement. The precautions taken to make sure that these offices were safe from every kind of attack were quite remarkable, and to a man of his age—he was in the early fifties—not only gimmicky but almost fanciful. In the world into which he had been born, a cultured, slow-moving world with aeroplanes and motor-cars in their infancy, radio at the cat's whisker stage, and television as improbable as flying to the moon, such subterranean premises would seem figments of the imagination of such men as, say, H.G. Wells or Jules Verne. Today the erstwhile imaginings of these men had become the commonplaces of life, but to Palfrey they were still a little unreal.

These quarters were far superior—and safer—to any he had known before.

They were surrounded, deep below the gravel and sludge of the subsoil beneath London, with walls of reinforced concrete. This concrete was ultra-strong and, even on the surface, could have withstood every

form of explosion—including a nuclear one unless it was directly on target. Inside this subterranean fortress were three floors. The first was the office or administration floor, the second the living and sleeping floor, the third divided into laboratories, research units, and isolation cells used for a variety of different purposes, not all of them pleasant.

Altogether, over a hundred people *lived* in these headquarters—lived, worked, slept, wined and dined in both safety and comfort. The air-conditioning was so perfect that no one ever gave conscious thought to the fact that it *was* air-conditioning. There were swimming baths, turkish baths, sauna baths; there were recreation rooms of all kinds, a small intimate theatre, an internal telephone and a closed circuit television system.

There was in fact everything a human being could desire except absolutely privacy, for in each room was a telelvision 'camera eye' which could be switched on at a moment's notice. There was a degree of privacy, however; the bedrooms and the living-quarters were never linked with the closed circuit television except in conditions of acute emergency, and even then, warning signals were given in plenty of time to ensure that no one could be caught unprepared and embarrassed. Nevertheless, that this privacy was not absolute, was probably the highest price paid by all who lived there.

On the upper floor—below the hotel, below the subway, below the deepest foundation of the biggest buildings—was the computer-controlled communications room, and in one way this was the most remarkable part of Z5. For every agent of the organisation could, at the touch of a switch, send a message to this room—a message which would be both visually and audibly recorded from any part of the world.

Now and again Palfrey marvelled at the fact that in the organisation's infancy, the communication had been mostly by telephone, sometimes—most unreliably—by radio, often by runners or messengers. For in its beginning Z5 had been a branch of Allied Intelligence functioning during the Second World War. In those early days there had been even difficulty in persuading all the Allied Nations to put their trust in a combined intelligence operation.

Now there was absolute trust among all nations.

Over the years, latterly with Palfrey as its leader, Z5 had become a supra-national secret service financed by the world's nations—even those which were politically hostile towards each other, sometimes even those actually at war with one another. Washington and Peking contributed towards its upkeep and activities; so did Moscow and Madrid. South Africa supported it; so did Malawi and Kenya and most of the other newly-emergent nations.

All subscribed, their agents working with others in Z5, united in a common cause—the cause of mankind.

Palfrey had conceived most of these things.

He had realised very soon after the Second World War, that with nuclear power, bacteriological weapons and gases freely available to all, the greatest danger might well come from small, fanatical groups, or megalomaniac individuals, rather than from hostile nations. One brilliant scientist could discover a weapon with which the whole world could be blackmailed; one multi-millionaire could finance and control such a weapon; one, two, or three aircraft could be enough to deliver it. So, each nation had been persuaded, by Palfrey, to help to develop Z5, whose task was to seek out the sources of such danger.

In more recent years the possibility of danger from outer space, even from the misguided or abortive ex-

periments of great powers, had been faced squarely. Time and time again the world's peril had been so great that, but for Z5 and Palfrey, there might have been no world. It did not matter *who* dropped nuclear bombs; or started fires that could not be put out; or caused floods and droughts and other forms of disaster; once these disasters were set in train, the world *was* in peril. And there was only one organisation which could cope by co-relating all reports of possible danger, whether from below the sea or from the sea itself, from beneath the earth or from the highest mountains, from an aircraft flying at fifty thousand feet, a space-craft half-a-million miles away, or from another planet.

Over the years, governments had grown into the habit of reporting any unexplained phenomena to Z5. So had many international organisations and the research stations. Contacts—or agents—of Z5 were at Cape Kennedy and at Jodrell Bank; in the Urals and in the great reactor stations within the shelter of the Great Wall of China. Each of these agents, and there were many, many thousands of them, could report direct to the London Headquarters—and so, to Palfrey.

That was not all.

There were Regional Headquarters, some as large as London's, some on a smaller scale, in many parts of the world. There was one in Washington and one in Peking, one in Moscow and another in Buenos Aires, one in Egypt and another in Johannesburg, one in New Delhi and yet another in Australia.

Whenever there was an alert for Z5 there was a widespread awareness, but—

There was only one Dr. Palfrey.

Palfrey had grown with Z5, was in a way its nerve centre. He had been one of its first agents and he had

been the instigator of the move to convert it from an organisation working for national groups to one working for all mankind. He no longer knew every agent by name and by appearance, by character and by record; but he knew far more of them than any other individual, a complete dossier of every man who served Z5 being available at a moment's notice.

There was another quality in him, another advantage he had over everyone else—even over Stefan Andromovitch, his second-in-command: *everyone* trusted him. Everyone believed in Z5—and throughout the world the name of Stanislaus Alexander Palfrey was synonymous with the organisation. Presidents and Prime Ministers, kings and princes, dictators and leaders of democracy, all trusted this one man as they trusted no other.

Yet no one who saw Palfrey for the first time could even begin to understand why this should be.

He was tall, yet not remarkably tall. Indeed, he was slightly round-shouldered and this seemed to take away a little of his height. He looked thin but that was deceptive, for physically he was a powerful man. Nothing about his movements or his manner, however, betrayed the fact that his mind was phenomenally quick and phenomenally thorough. He was fair, almost golden-haired, and he had a habit of twisting a few strands about his forehead and then patting them down in a half-curl. His grey eyes often held a dreamy expression. He had a high-bridged nose and very sensitive lips—and his chin, if anything, was inclined to recede.

Yet this man could command princes; could control an audience of millions; had won the respect, the admiration and the liking of most people of the world.

Those who came to know him well were astonished most by his humility . . .

Palfrey sat at a big, flat-topped desk of mahogany, an exact replica of a desk he had used for years, and placed a cold capsule in his mouth. He had been sniffling on and off for days, in spite of the capsules, but at least the cold got no worse. His study-cum-office was not large and yet gave the appearance of spaciousness, two walls being lined with books from floor to ceiling. A third, behind him, opened on to a 'garden' or a patio which could seem bathed in sunshine at the touch of a switch. He lived here most of the time, although he had a *pied-à-terre* in Mayfair and another in the South of France. Leading from this room was a passage with an arched ceiling. This, in turn, led to the offices of his chief assistant, his secretary, and his general staff.

At one side of his desk was an enormous relief map, representing the world in Mercatorial projection. On the other side was a globe, also in relief; and beyond this a wall map of the known galaxies in bewildering detail.

He was reading a news story from the *France Soir* about a man whose hair had fallen out. The victim was a research scientist in the nuclear reactor field and this loss of hair could have some special significance. A faint buzzing sound made him look up and see the green light at a panel above the single telephone on the desk. Green meant that this was an inside call.

He lifted the receiver.

"Dr. Palfrey."

"Sap," a man said, "there's a call from Washington for you."

"Who is it?"

"The Secretary of the Interior."

"Jefferson," Palfrey said. "Better not keep him waiting."

"No, sir!" There was a moment's pause before a

man spoke with an accent which Palfrey placed immediately as Bostonian.

"Dr. Palfrey?"

"Sorry if I've kept you," Palfrey said.

"You haven't kept me at all. Palfrey—" the other hesitated, giving the impression that he did not quite know how to broach his subject. "I think we have serious cause for anxiety."

Palfrey murmured: "I hope not, sir." But he was quite sure that Jefferson would not have said such a thing unless he were absolutely convinced; and if this man was convinced he was almost certainly right.

"Have you had any reports of trouble with timber? Trees," he added, with swift vehemence.

"No," Palfrey answered.

"I've just had a message from the Director of National Parks, Forests and Monuments," Jefferson told him. "Have you heard of Christmas Valley?"

"I have indeed—I once spent a weekend there." Palfrey caught his breath. "Don't say something's happened to those trees."

"They're snapping like glass," Jefferson told him. There was shocked disbelief in his voice.

"*What?*"

"A man has only to lean against one for it to snap."

Palfrey just checked himself from saying: "I can't believe it!" He could picture the great trees in his mind's eye, the grandeur of the vast valley.

"I'm told that the local Head Ranger is terrified of what will happen if there should be a storm," went on Jefferson. "He is quite sure that the first heavy rain, or the first snow will fell every tree in the valley. Judging from samples taken, every part of the valley is affected."

"Is there any indication at all of what's causing it?" Palfrey asked.

"Not yet," answered Jefferson. "We've had sections of the trees flown here for examination, and—"

"No!" exclaimed Palfrey, appalled. "Send them back without opening them."

"Why should you say—" began Jefferson, only to stop abruptly. "My God. Ted!" he called in a stentorian voice, making Palfrey put the earpiece further away: "Ted! . . . Try to stop those Christmas Valley tree sections from being shipped. If they've been shipped, make sure they're not opened . . . Why? . . . Think, man, think!" He came back to the mouthpiece, speaking more quietly: "I can't imagine why I didn't consider that before, Palfrey. If whatever causes it should be contagious or infectious it could be passed on from tree to tree and forest to forest."

"We mustn't send the samples to the experts; we need to send the experts to Christmas Valley," Palfrey said. He was thinking aloud: "We'd better get specialists from Australia—Germany—France—Scandinavia, all the forest countries. You'd like Z5 to get moving at once, I suppose."

"You can't move quickly enough for me," said Jefferson. "Palfrey—"

"Yes?"

"If this disease spreads we'll soon have no wood, no paper, no shade. Soil erosion would become a world-wide danger. It couldn't be more serious potentially."

"I can see that," Palfrey said soberly. "I shall give it priority, my word on it."

He rang off, and pushed back his chair. His right hand went to his forehead and he began to coil a few strands of silky hair about his forefinger. Then he lifted the telephone and pressed one of the buttons in the panel. Immediately, a woman spoke.

"Yes, Sap?" This was his personal assistant, Joyce Morgan, who had been in Z5 for years.

"I want to send a message to all Regional Headquarters and I want them to pass it on to all forestry experts and experts in diseases of wood and trees in their region. Send that preliminary notice first. We'll need the best forestry men available to fly to the United States at short notice. I'll have the details of the message ready in a few minutes."

"I'll send out the preliminary notice at once," Joyce promised.

Palfrey rang off, patted the hair down on his forehead, picked up a pencil and began to doodle. Then he wrote swiftly:

Mysterious disease or blight attacking all trees in Christmas Valley, California stop Local Authorities puzzled stop Survey of all forests for similar disease should be started at once in all regions stop Top experts from all major forest areas requested to fly at once to Sacramento California to inspect situation on the site stop Limited laboratory facilities available on site stop Meanwhile recommend absolute standstill in all timber felling logging afforestation and closest inspection all forests and nurseries.

He pressed a bell push in his desk and Joyce came in, a pleasant, youthful-looking woman with dark hair and fine eyes.

"Here it is," Palfrey said. "And I shall fly to Sacramento myself. Isn't our top tree man Professor Winstanley?"

"Yes," answered Joyce. "He's in Scotland, Sap—in Perth. I've a call in for him, they're fetching him to the telephone."

"Good. Get in touch with Lord Wolhampton of the Wolhampton Corporation, give him a copy of the message and ask him to check with all his subsidiaries and associated companies," Palfrey said. "And ask him if he'll put his research laboratories at our disposal." He frowned slightly. "I don't know much about him but Wolhampton's got a reputation for being a bit pompous. Ask him if he'll give me an hour or so as soon as I'm back from America."

"I'll make that the next job I do," promised Joyce.

CHAPTER 5

The Storm

Palfrey dozed.

He had learned over the years to relax whenever he could. In times of strain and tension this almost disciplined habit had stood him in good stead. It did so now, for in spite of the whine of the four-engined VC10 which was flying to Washington direct, he actually slept for twenty minutes. In Washington he would meet the forestry experts, and with them fly on to Sacramento in the Californian desert—a hundred and fifty miles from Christmas Valley.

He woke—and saw Professor Winstanley smile at him from across the gangway.

"I envy you, Palfrey."

"What have I done now?"

"Slept."

"Oh, that. My life is really one long spell of hibernation."

Winstanley's smile broadened.

He was a pink-skinned man in the early sixties, completely bald, with short, stubby lashes and very thin eyebrows which gave him an appearance of continual surprise. Yet his voice was unexpectedly deep and well-modulated, and his smile was humorous and attractive; the pinkness made the blue of his eyes seem very bright.

"I can imagine you hibernating!"

Palfrey said: "Have you read the report about the brittle trees?"

"Of course."

"Have you any opinion about it?"

"None at all."

Palfrey blinked: "Is it as phenomenal as I think it?"

"Quite, I should say. I've never heard of anything remotely like it. Obviously the wood dries out very quickly, even before the foliage. The sap cannot withstand whatever dehydrating substance is causing the blight."

"Substance?" echoed Palfrey.

"There must be one," Winstanley said, "obviously. The report says that trees which appeared to be sound one day were brittle two days later."

"Yes." Palfrey sounded dubious.

"Either that's an exaggeration or it's the most remarkable and alarming thing that has happened in the history of trees. Between you and me—" Winstanley paused.

"You're not convinced," Palfrey finished for him.

"I shall want a great deal of convincing," declared Winstanley. "If we were told that the disease took several months to draw out the sap and makes the tree brittle there might be reason to fear the local people are right, but two days—" he broke off with a shrug, and raised his eyebrows comically. "What do you think?"

"That we can more or less rule out the possibility of the Secretary of the Interior and the O. C. State Parks making so elementary a mistake," Palfrey answered. "By the way, I stopped Jefferson from sending any of the pieces to Washington—I hope," he added under his breath.

"Very wise precaution," Winstanley said. "Very

wise. After all there could be something in it." After a pause, he added: "I suppose."

In fact, of the four sealed boxes addressed to the Secretary of the Interior from Christmas Valley, one was delayed by an engine failure in a mail van. It arrived three hours after the first three, all of which were put in a strong-room and securely locked. The fourth was opened by a young executive who had not received special instructions; no one had thought there was need in view of the fact that the others had arrived—no more had been expected.

The young executive looked into a box which contained little brittle wood chippings and a great deal of wood dust.

"Looks like garbage to me," he mused aloud.

He left it in his office to check with others the next morning. Janitors came and looked at the box and fingered the chippings. Dust from the trees of Christmas Valley was carried by four people altogether, including the executive, into the city of Washington.

And Washington is a city of trees and parks and open spaces.

Unaware of the failure of his precautions, Palfrey sat back in a Lincoln limousine and was driven from the National Airport over the Key Bridge, along Constitution Avenue to the office of the Interior. Washington was as hot and humid as its reputation. Most people in the streets looked tired and dejected. Inside the buildings, air-conditioning coolness was taken for granted.

In the Secretary's reception room there were already forestry experts from Canada, the Argentine and Western Germany. The Swedish delegate was to fly from Gander to Los Angeles and thence to Sacramento

and the Valley, while the Australian and other Far Eastern forestry men would land at Los Angeles and join the others at the Valley.

"Except that I am very grateful to you all for coming, there is nothing to report," said Jefferson, an elderly, spare-boned, spade-chinned man, who with beard and sideboards would have looked very like Abraham Lincoln. "An Army Air Force aircraft is at Dulles Airport to take you to Sacramento, and smaller military aircraft will take you on from there."

"No reports of brittle trees from anywhere else?" inquired Palfrey. His voice was husky; the cold symptoms wouldn't go, and to make speaking more difficult one of the capsules had stuck in his throat. He felt at his least impressive.

"No—but confirmation has come through that all the trees in Christmas Valley so far examined are infected," Jefferson answered. "You will fly over the valley on your way from Sacramento."

When they changed planes in Sacramento the heat was scorching; over a hundred in the shade. Palfrey could not get out of it soon enough.

From the smaller aircraft it seemed, at first, that there was only desert and a few outcrops of rock beneath them, but soon they saw the mountains of the High Sierras and beyond these, Christmas Valley. Behind them in the west the sun shone with fierce intensity, but straight ahead great storm clouds gathered. They flew around the shores of Lake Tahoe and over snow-capped mountains, vivid white against the blue sheen of the huge lake, until at last Christmas Valley loomed up with its masses of trees. All of the men leaned towards the windows. It was Sakolov, the Russian, who said to Palfrey in a gruff voice:

"But they look strong, they look healthy!"

Palfrey said: "One hardly dares to hope that we've been hoaxed."

"Hoaxed?"

"Fooled."

"Ah—fooled, yes." Sakolov was gravely pleased that he understood.

"What did I tell you?" asked Winstanley.

Storm clouds thickened at the eastern end of the valley as the aircraft flew into the landing strip. Here and there were tiny clearings with single chalets or groups of two or three. Other clearings were much bigger, obviously housing thirty or forty families. The biggest clearing was at Christmas Village, and just beyond the village was the short runway. A ribbon of road wound among the trees, making a sudden, sharp descent towards the desert. Once this was behind them, there seemed to be nothing but trees in the valley. The river looked dark, and the evening was sultry as they went in to land.

Sheriff Pike was waiting for them with Rakowitz, the Head Ranger, two jeeps and two large, green station wagons. As the party of experts climbed out of the machine there was a distant rumble of thunder.

Winstanley said: "I imagine if there's a storm, it gets trapped in the valley."

"That is so," answered Rakowitz. "Even when the trees are healthy we lose hundreds in a bad storm." He glanced anxiously towards the sky. "And this will be a very bad one."

Ascheim, the German, stared at a stand of Douglas firs, tall and green and healthy looking. Sakolov frowned towards them. The Head Ranger looked both old and tired—as if he were incapable of making a great effort—*almost as if he had lost his nerve.*

"They are as healthy as any in the Black Forest," declared Ascheim.

"They are as brittle as thin ice," Rakowitz said, in a weary, disillusioned tone.

"I cannot believe it."

"There is an easy way to find out," said Rakowtiz, without resentment, but with a touch of impatience.

Ascheim and Winstanley approached the trees together, the German stiff and brisk, the Englishman almost casually. All the others watched closely. Palfrey could understand exactly how the doubters felt and yet he, himself, was convinced of the truth.

"Those trees—they are at least a hundred-sixty feet high," marvelled Sakolov.

"And five feet round," said Palfrey.

The two men were very close now, and almost within arm's reach. The German, tall, lean, erect, stood virtually at attention. Winstanley, ungainly and untidy, a pipe drooping from his lips, went straight up to a tree which stood in a small clearing, as if to push it; then at the last moment raised his right leg and kicked a spot about a foot off the ground.

The crack which followed was deafening.

The tree toppled slowly over, while a thick dust rose into the evening light.

"It is—not possible," Sakolov breathed.

Into the silence which followed there came another roll of thunder, this time much nearer, and on its heels came a gust of wind which howled among the trees. Branches cracked and fell, bringing other branches down with them. Ascheim stretched out his right hand, the forefinger pointing at a spot in the trunk on a level with his chin. It seemed an agonising time before he pressed. The crack did not come immediately, and Palfrey sensed the tension among the group.

Ascheim, grey faced, pushed harder, and the crack came; the tree began to fall.

"These trees were as good as ever three days ago,"

declared Sheriff Pike, his face expressionless, his voice a little higher pitched than normal. "There were mules tethered to them—you can see the ties now."

They could see reins, hanging over the lower branches.

The thunder roared and it grew much darker; the air was sultry, and insects flew low, biting sharply.

"Where are the local people?" Palfrey asked.

"Evacuated," answered Sheriff Pike laconically. "We got as many tourists as we could out of the Valley yesterday. When the storm warning came later we got everyone out except the rangers and volunteers." He drew a deep breath. "If we get lightning without rain, and one tree is struck, the valley will go up like tinder. Ain't that so, Rak?"

"Right enough," the Head Ranger confirmed without hesitation.

"So we've widened the breaks at all the main clearings, and we're keeping the roads as clear as we can," went on the sheriff. "You want to see, gents?" He moved towards the cars. "It won't take long."

They piled back into the cars, and as they did so it occurred to Palfrey that none of them had as yet even started to investigate the phenomenon, they were so appalled by what they saw. The sheriff took the wheel of one car, Rakowitz the other. They drove uphill for about ten minutes, taking half-a-dozen hairpin bends. Then they came to a sign, reading VIEWPOINT, and turned off the road on to a wide parking place. No cars were here. A few blue jays, their feathers like burnished steel, flitted about restlessly. The group of men left the cars and went towards a stone parapet. Leaning over this, they could see the road winding beneath them—and on either side men pushing—*pushing*—the great trees down. One moment there was a haze of dust caught by the eve-

ning sun—and the next, the sun was blotted out by a great black cloud. A low, ominous growl of thunder rent the air, followed by a vivid flash of lightning.

Out of the east came a howling gust of wind.

Palfrey stood watching, horrified and incredulous, knowing that what he saw was true, but hardly able to believe it. For the wind—wind driving at perhaps thirty miles an hour, not a whirlwind, not a tornado, hardly gale force—cut a swathe through the ranks of the trees so that they fell, right and left and straight ahead, leaving a hideous trail of desolation behind it. The giant trees broke like matchwood and the wind carried the dust high into the air so that it hung like a pall beneath the blackened sky.

More wind came, from all directions now, and with each whining gust thousands upon thousands of the trees fell. Soon the cloud of dust rose so high that sight was dimmed, subdued to the awful sound of crashing timber.

With the thunder and the lightning, heavy rain came.

It howled and spat and lashed the forest, laying the dust so that everything could be seen again—a vast, desolate area of felled and broken trees.

The cracking of the trees began to die away.

The fury of the storm began to slacken.

No rain and little wind had touched the plateau where the observers stood, but it was cooler. Palfrey rubbed his eyes and began to coil hair round his finger.

"Perhaps you believe the sight of your eyes now," said Rakowtiz bitterly.

"We believe it," Palfrey said.

"There's one thing I don't believe," remarked Winstanley. "That these trees were healthy only a few days ago." When no one responded, he went on stubbornly: "It can't be true. I've known trees which

have been dead for a dozen years have more substance in them than those." He was angry and his anger was directed towards Rakowtiz. "There can't have been any recent surveys. We ought to have been told of this weeks, even months ago." He straightened up, in the attitude of an accusing judge. "Why weren't we told? Who went wrong on this? That's what I want to know."

"Hardly the most important factor," murmured Palfrey. "Not for the moment, anyhow. Whether it takes two days, two months or two years to develop, the essential thing to discover is how it spreads, whether it's gone beyond the valley, whether it can be stopped." Winstanley began to speak, but Palfrey both waved and talked him down. "We need chemical analysis of the dust—it's very fine indeed, very unlike ordinary wood dust. We need to examine some of the standing timber. I know nothing about trees except that they come in coniferous and deciduous species, but you gentlemen know a great deal. Professor Winstanley, will you and Dr. Rakowitz work together on organising the research, preparing the laboratory, listing any equipment you need? . . . Professor Sakolov and Dr. Ascheim, will you work with the Forest Rangers to select on-the-spot samplings?" He moved to the big scale relief map, which had been removed from its protective glass; pins with red heads were dotted all about it. "I would say an hour or two of the preliminary work will be enough for planning, and when the others arrive from Los Angeles and Sacramento they will be able to start work right away. What we need to know," he went on, talking very quickly and yet distinctly, "is whether it is a blight caused by an aphis-type parasite, whether it started here, whether any particular species of tree appears to be the carrier, whether the carrier is animal, vegetable or mineral—"

Sakolov interrupted.

"There is no need, Dr. Palfrey, for you to continue. We are aware of the requirements."

"Good," Palfrey said briskly. "Sheriff Pike, can you find a room nearby where you and I can work on our side of the problem—who may have carried dust or samples of the rotten wood out of the valley?"

"With a wind like we've had, it will have been carried on the air all over the western half of California," Ascheim said.

"It could be disastrous for the whole of the North American continent," said Sanderson, heavily. He was Jefferson's emissary, and this was the first time he had spoken; his face had the droll pathos of a bloodhound's. "I am very much afraid."

CHAPTER 6

The Missing

Sheriff Pike said: "You know how to handle people, Dr. Palfrey."

"Sometimes," Palfrey murmured.

"Most of the time, I guess. You've been to Christmas Valley before, haven't you? Don't tell me—it would be around fifteen years ago. You came with your wife, a very beautiful woman. Her name was Dru—Drusilla!"

Palfrey said in surprise: "What a remarkable memory!"

"You were a remarkable couple," the sheriff retorted drily.

They crossed the road from the administration building to another row of single storey, log-walled buildings with overhanging roofs and long, narrow windows and deep porches. The names were burned into the fascias or hung, as shingles, from tall posts outside each porch. Here were all the shops—a market, a hardware and camping store, a bakery, a bookshop, an electrician's—and here was the sheriff's office. As they stepped inside, the street lamps went on, bright in the evening gloom. A young man was standing at a map on the wall; there were maps everywhere in Christmas Village.

"Hi, Tom," Sheriff Pike said. "Say hallo to Dr. Palfrey."

"Nice to know you, Doctor." Tom was clean-limbed, fresh-faced, bright-eyed.

"What's new, Tom?" inquired the sheriff.

"There's been no word from Harmon since two o'clock. He went after that party in All Seasons Canyon."

"The storm was in All Seasons Canyon," the sheriff said to Palfrey. "On the map you'll find it marked the Canyon of All Seasons. It can be very rough there. Anyone else missing?"

"No, sir. Everyone else has been accounted for and sent out."

Sheriff Pike glanced at Palfrey wryly, then led the way to an inner office, with a large pedestal desk, cabinets and cupboards. He motioned to a tall-backed rocking chair, then plugged in a coffee pot. A tray with cups and saucers stood on the top of a refrigerator.

He sat at the desk. Behind him, on the log wall, was a rack containing rifles; another containing revolvers.

"Dr. Palfrey," he said, "I did the wrong thing, I guess. I evacuated the whole valley and sent away everyone I could locate. Most of them are in Townsville by now, but a lot of them are further afield. Maybe some have gone by air. They could be three thousand miles away."

Palfrey said: "Yes, that's what's worrying Mr. Sanderson."

"I couldn't be more sorry," the sheriff said. "That particular danger didn't strike me."

Palfrey said. "A lot of people could have been in and out of the valley in the past few weeks; any of them could have carried the blight, even if its centre is here."

"You don't have to be kind," the sheriff remarked flatly. "I should have kept those people here. We've

plenty of food. Christmas Village could have been isolated completely. If this spreads—"

"I suppose none of us are entirely blameless," Palfrey said, "hind-sight being so much sharper than the other kind. What's this about missing people?"

"There was a party at All Seasons Canyon on the northern side—the most inaccesssible. There's no road, only tracks. A party of four went through to camp and fish about a week ago, and haven't come back. A man named Harmon went to bring them back. Harmon—" he told the story of what had happened at the chalet; of Johnny Woll's death and of Clive Thomas's suspicions.

"What's your opinion about that?" Palfrey asked.

"I don't have an opinion," the sheriff answered. "Harmon's no fool. He's often been to the forest, he knows it better than most. That's why I used him."

"Had the man Woll been here before?"

"Not to my knowledge."

Palfrey said: "This fishing party—had the members of it been here before?"

"Twice," the sheriff answered. "This was the third summer they've spent an early vacation here. Dr. Palfrey, we can talk to Townsville and stop a lot of those people from going further afield. Don't you think we should get busy?"

Palfrey said: "I doubt it."

"What gives you the doubt?"

"In the first place the blight may have been started simultaneously in several places," Palfrey answered. "In the second, if it is spread by contagion the damage is already done. In the third, if neither of these suppositions are true, then we don't want to start rumours. If the trouble *is* confined to Christmas Valley and the Canyon of All Seasons, no one need know much about it. Tell Townsville there's been a sus-

pected case of smallpox and we need to trace everyone who's been here for the past week. How well do you know the authorities at Townsville?"

"The sheriff there is my brother," Pike answered. He lifted the telephone and dialled—almost at once he spoke: "Bill . . . Marvin here . . . We've got trouble . . . Different trouble, we've a smallpox suspect . . . No one you know . . . Yes, isolate everyone who came in from the Valley and check . . . O.K., O.K., so I won't teach you your business." He gave a wry little smile. "No one comes into Christmas Valley except through Townsville so it's all yours . . . O.K. . . . How's Lucy, and the kids? . . . Fine, fine." Pike rang off, stood up, unplugged the percolator and took cream and sugar from the ice box. He poured out. "What next?" he inquired, without a change of tone.

"Do you know why Rakowitz is so worried?" asked Palfrey.

"I know I would be worried if I'd spent a lifetime in Christmas Valley and grown the finest, straightest, healthiest, Douglas firs in the land—and then had this happen."

"Could he know why it's happened?" asked Palfrey thoughtfully.

"You mean, has he got a guilty conscience?"

"I mean could any of his research have gone sour on him?"

"I can't say," admitted Sheriff Pike.

"How well do you know him?"

"I've been sheriff of Wenceslaus for thirty years, long before this was a National Forest and a State Park."

"How well have you got to know Rakowitz in those thirty years?"

The sheriff stirred his coffee.

"No one knows him really well," he replied at last.

"He's certainly a dedicated man, yes, sir. He–" the sheriff broke off. "Is this blight as serious as we think it is?"

"I could be," answered Palfrey. "And whatever you have to tell me I'll find out sooner or later. If sooner, it will help more."

"Sure," Sheriff Pike said. "Sure. Dr. Palfrey, I don't like talking about any man behind his back. But this is a case of must. Rakowitz has been doing a lot of research and experimenting in the valley. He's worked over in All Seasons Canyon–lookee here." He stood up and went to a map spread out on another desk. "Here it is." He traced the Canyon, stretching like a fjord with smaller canyons leading off it in all directions; and as he had said, it was marked 'The Canyon of All Seasons'. At one end was a waterfall, and through the land ran a lesser river, running into the main one further down the valley. "Just outside the mouth of the canyon, beyond the lake at the foot of the falls, were the experimental areas."

"Were?" asked Palfrey sharply.

"Most things about Christmas Valley are now in the past tense," the sheriff said flatly. "Rak used the smaller valleys near the canyon for his experiments."

"Experiments in what?"

"Dr. Palfrey," the sheriff said, "as I have already told you, Dr. Rakowitz is a dedicated man. He believes in trees. For him, trees are the most important thing in the world. He puts all land erosion down to the deforestation permitted everywhere. He regards soil preservation as the world's number one priority. You want to know something more about Rakowitz and the Canyon of All Seasons?"

"Sheriff, I want to know why you're taking so long to tell me what you're telling me."

"Fair enough," Sheriff Pike moved a little uncomfortably, and then looked Palfrey squarely in the face. "Forgive me if I repeat yet again that Rakowitz is a dedicated man. To people as well as trees. He believes that if enough of the right kind of tree can be grown in the right kind of places the food problems of the world will be solved. Trees make rich soil, trees hold water in the soil—that's the way he talks. Get him in the right mood and he's an inspired prophet."

Palfrey said: "Go on."

"In All Seasons Canyon practically every climatic condition in the world can be found," declared the sheriff. "Look here . . ." He pointed with a small, nutbrown forefinger, "There's desert—that's the lowest place in the United States outside of Death Valley, one hundred and four feet below sea level . . . There's scrub . . . There's rock . . . There's land at every altitude from sea level to ten thousand feet. Can you begin to imagine the variations in growing conditions in the canyon?"

"I certainly can," said Palfrey thoughtfully.

"So. Well, Rakowitz saw this thirty years ago. He began to experiment with his beloved trees. He planted different kinds on all the slopes, made terraces in the valleys, widened the river which runs out of the lake, built an irrigation system. On the west the canyon gets a lot of rain but on the east it's as dry as the Arizona desert. There were two hundred and twenty-seven different plantations in All Seasons Canyon itself. I know, I saw every one of them. And he used to send specimens from all the plantations to other national parks and out of the country, to check how they grew in other places. You follow?"

"Yes," Palfrey said, but his heart was heavy, both for Rakowitz and because of the limitless area which

now held the results of his experiments. "There was a world conference—you say 'convention'—on trees in Geneva last year. Was Rakowitz there?"

"He was one of the United States delegates," Sheriff Pike answered. "When he came back he looked ten years younger—he wasn't the only man who believed in trees. He started work again harder than ever. The main part of the forest was run by his Deputy and the other rangers. Rakowitz employed a special staff of experienced forestry men to work on the plantations outside and inside the canyon. And Dr. Palfrey—he not only wanted to find what trees grew best in different soils and climatic conditions, he wanted them to grow fast."

"Ahhh," Palfrey breathed.

"Instant trees," said the sheriff, almost bitterly.

"Did he succeed?"

"Oh, sure he did."

Palfrey felt his heart thumping heavily.

"You mean some of the plantations were for *fast* growing trees?"

"Yes, sir. I've seen plantations of seedlings which grew twenty feet in a year," declared Pike. "I've seen stands of timber a hundred feet high which were seedlings four years earlier. He was growing trees real fast, Dr. Palfrey."

Palfrey made himself ask, "How did he do it?"

"That's his secret. All I can tell you is, he experimented in the canyon. He wasn't a rich man, but he bought the growing rights in the canyon, so he could work it his own way. He didn't employ Park or Forest Rangers, except in the rest of the valley."

"You must know *some*thing about what went on in the canyon," Palfrey reasoned.

"Oh, sure. I know he imported a lot of the usual chemicals. I don't know what else he imported. He

would have whole truck loads of fertiliser in powder and in liquid form delivered to the lake, and with his team of employees take the sacks and the drums into the canyon by boat. He had some deliveries made by helicopter, too."

Palfrey said slowly: "You say he isn't a rich man?"

"He certainly isn't a millionaire as far as I know," said the sheriff. "Maybe he makes a profit from what he does in the canyon. He works on salary in the park itself. Maybe he could save forty or fifty thousand dollars. On the Ranger Service you don't earn enough to save much more."

"Does he have any partners?"

The sheriff said: "Dr. Palfrey, I just don't know."

"Have you any ideas?"

"Sometimes I've wondered whether Washington finances him," said Pike, with a shrug. "Washington likes to keep its secrets. Why they should want to keep this one I can't imagine. The chemicals come in unmarked drums and sacks. I do know that."

"If not Washington—" Palfrey began.

"Dr. Palfrey, I've been thinking and wondering about this for three years," said Sheriff Pike. "If Rakowitz gets his money from the Federal Agency, fine. If he gets it from an industrial source—fine. Who cares? But why make a secret out of it? I could understand him not telling everyone but why not tell me?"

"How long has he been spending big money?" asked Palfrey.

"For all of three years. He began to expand fast, he brought in more men—"

"Local men?"

"There aren't any local men," the sheriff answered brusquely. "Not to say local, anyway. He employed at least fifty in the canyon. Some of them are migrant workers from southern California, maybe from Mex-

ico. Some of them come from overseas. They come in over the mountains, we never see them in Wenceslaus. It's difficult to get into the canyon anyway, the mouth is very narrow and the river flows fast. Now and again vacationers have tried, but they've been warned off. When I talked to Rakowitz about it he said he had so many commercial secrets he didn't want industrial spies to go nosying around. And he *does* have a land grant in the canyon."

There was silence for a few minutes, before Pike drew a deep breath and went on:

"I've got other troubles. That fishing party and the man Harmon have been missing for twenty-four hours. Are they lost? Did they meet with an accident? Or are they in the Canyon of All Seasons? That's what I want to know."

"What we want to know is whether the blight is a result of the experiments in All Seasons Canyon," Palfrey said. "Do you have a helicopter here?"

"Yes. But we can't use a helicopter by night. The clearings are too difficult to find."

"We can go first thing in the morning," Palfrey said.

"Dr. Palfrey—" for the first time Sheriff Pike seemed ill-at-ease.

"Yes?"

"You could talk to Rakowitz first."

"If I do, will *he* talk?" asked Palfrey. "If the blight comes from All Seasons Canyon, wouldn't he prefer me not to find out? Wouldn't—"

He broke off, for there were running footsteps outside, then the street door opened and a man said breathlessly:

"Where's the sheriff? Where—"

Sheriff Pike was out of his chair and at the door before the man had finished speaking. A Forest Ranger

stood outside, breathing heavily, hat awry, alarm showing in his eyes.

"It's Dr. Rakowitz," he gasped. "He's dying."

CHAPTER 7

Death

Winstanley was bending over the body of Rakowitz, which was stretched out on a wooden bench. A youthful-looking man laid a hand on Rakowitz's head. Several others, including Sanderson, stood about the office where Rakowitz worked. Palfrey joined Winstanley, looking down on the pale face of the Head Ranger.

The youthful-looking man said: "He's dead, I guess."

"What happened?" Palfrey asked Winstanley.

"I don't know for certain," Winstanley answered, "but I think he took morphine. He tossed a couple of tablets into his mouth when someone brought in coffee, the same way you might take one of your capsules."

The man on the other side of the bench said: "The pupils are pin-points. I'd look for morphine, too. It won't be hard to make sure. I'm Dr. Kent," he added abruptly.

"Can you do an autopsy here?" Palfrey asked.

"Surely."

"The quicker we know how he died, the better," Sheriff Pike agreed. "No need to wait for an order, Sam."

"If I can have some help to take him away," the doctor requested.

None of the others spoke more than a word or two

as two rangers brought in a stretcher and the body of the Head Ranger was taken out. As the door closed, Sheriff Pike approached Winstanley. Sanderson said: "I want a drink." No one took any notice of him. Sakolov, with his broad, swarthy face and rather Mongolian eyes, moved about restlessly. Ascheim wasn't with the group.

"So he took tablets," remarked the sheriff.

"You doubting me?" demanded Winstanley, bridling.

"No, sir, but bald statements have to be substantiated."

"I've told you—he took two tablets."

"Out of a bottle?"

"Out of a cylindrical container from his pocket."

"Did you touch it, afterwards?"

"Why the devil should I?"

Palfrey thought of a more significant question: Why was Winstanley so quick to take offence? But he said nothing. Sakolov lit a long, pale brown cigarette.

Winstanley said: "Why should he kill himself?"

"That's two in two days," Pike remarked.

"What's that?" asked Palfrey sharply.

"Johnny Woll, remember, I told you about him."

Palfrey said, "He fell or was pushed over a cliff, you said."

"He was full of morphine," the sheriff stated quietly. "It's possible, just possible I guess, that he took tablets and then climbed over the rail, but it's not likely. More likely he was unconscious and someone threw him over."

"Please," Sakolov interjected. "I do not understand. You talk of murder?"

"Don't make it worse than it is," Sanderson protested.

"Just seeing the facts as they are," insisted Sheriff

Pike. He seemed older—it was as if the situation had carved each of the myriad lines on his face deeper. "If Rakowitz died of morphine poisoning, that's two. He certainly killed himself."

"*If* the tablets he took were morphine," Winstanley muttered.

"I still do not understand," protested Sakolov. "Why do men die here? Is there a connection between these deaths and the blight?"

"That's what we have to find out," Palfrey remarked. "Have you made any progress, Professor?"

"There is little progress one can make," replied Sakolov. "The laboratory facilities here are not good, one can be sure the cause is not a common one. There is some indication of aphis, but that is to be expected, it is not necessarily a contributory cause. The wood —and Dr. Ascheim agrees with me, is much like very old rotten wood. Wood which has gone very dry after some kind of bacteria have infected it. It powders, as such wood does." He picked up a small piece and squeezed it between his fingers. Immediately it broke into tiny pieces, then into a fine powder. "The life has been taken out of it, it is dried to nothing."

"Dehydrated," Sanderson barked.

"There is no trace of any known disease," Sakolov said flatly. "I do not think there is much purpose in our staying, Dr. Palfrey. Samples from all over the valley have now been brought here; Dr. Rakowitz had arranged that before we arrived." He touched a pile of small plastic envelopes, each of them marked. Palfrey crossed to examine them. Different kinds of trees were named, such as Douglas fir, spruce, larch, mountain pine, and there were indications as to the areas from which they had come. Wenceslaus Hill was one, High Peak another, River Bank a third, Lakeside

a fourth. Altitudes and latitudes and longitudinal details were given.

There was no sample from the Canyon of All Seasons.

Sanderson asked, uneasily: "Can we do much here, Palfrey?"

Palfrey said briskly: "Probably not, the position is much worse than we'd thought. The essential thing is to investigate the wood and dust with the best possible conditions. I shall stay for a day or two, but you hardly need me." He smiled.

No one smiled back.

"What worries me, is, how far *has* it spread?" said Sanderson.

That was the very moment, although Sanderson could have had no idea of it, when two lovers leaned against a tree in Dupont Circle, Washington, and the tree cracked, toppled, broke into thousands of pieces. It scared hundreds of people away, bringing traffic to a standstill. Several of the fugitives knocked into other trees, which cracked and broke and fell. Pieces littered the grass, the flower beds, the roadway, under a thick fog of dust. One car crashed into the back of a second, another mounted the pavement and pinned a middle-aged man against a stone post. His moaning was almost drowned by the cries of alarm, the cracking of trees, the squealing of brakes.

And that was the moment when Joyce Morgan sent a message through to Palfrey, saying:

No reports of brittle trees from any other place.

It was almost the moment when George Harmon saw the fire burning in a picnic barbecue fireplace on

the banks of Christmas River. It was bright and pleasing; warming too. The four fishermen were sitting round it, yarning, while the proceeds of their sport sizzled over the fire on a home-made spit. Opposite this spot was the mouth of the Canyon of All Seasons. There were no trees close by, only open land and pleasant meadows. There was the chatter of crickets and the whisper of other insects, against the distant sound of a waterfall. Creeping over the rim of the canyon was a crescent moon, its brightness dimming the stars.

Harmon, on foot because his mini-jeep had broken down, walked slowly and cautiously. The fire glowed even and red before him, but sparks could carry a long way and some nearby trees might catch. He avoided trees with great care, drawing slowly nearer.

Presently he saw figures beyond the fire, unrelated to, and unseen by, those around it, and these puzzled him.

Quite unaware, the fishermen talked on. One of them suddenly roared with laughter in which the others joined. Harmon, himself approaching cautiously, watched the second party's stealthy footsteps with surprise.

Suddenly the figures moved more swiftly into the radius of the firelight. The laughter stopped abruptly. A man exclaimed: "*What the hell?*" and then without warning he sceamed: "Good God!"

Steel flashed; *the steel of knives*. It was unbelievable and yet had a hideous reality.

Harmon watched, almost petrified, as the four fishermen were slaughtered and as their killers, six men in all, dragged the bodies towards the river and heaved them in, then tossed their gear and rods after them—all without a word.

Finished, they moved away, leaving Harmon, un-

seen, unsuspected, alone in the tinder-dry valley, terrified lest he should make noise enough to bring the killers back.

He dared not move far by night, but he had to get some distance away from this cursed spot. He was fifty miles from Christmas Village, and even if he were not seen, he wondered what chance he had of reaching the village on foot.

He studied the stars and began to move cautiously forward.

Palfrey woke just after five o'clock.

He was alone, in a bedroom behind the Administration Building. As he stirred, he remembered the tension of the previous night, tension which had not eased even after the experts had gone, carrying their specimens of wood and dust in sealed metal boxes. It was not yet full daylight, but enough light came in at the window for him to see. He sneezed three times in quick succession, took a capsule with little faith, and then, rising from the bed, went in search of coffee and cream; he missed his tea. Plugging in the coffee pot, he had a shower and returned to the main room.

He wondered how long Sheriff Pike would be, but there proved little time to wonder, for a car drew up outside and Pike looked in at the window. Palfrey beckoned, then realised that he hadn't unbolted the door. He went across to it, his movements slow and stiff—he had not got to bed until half-past one.

Pike came in. brisk and alert—and immediately alarming.

"Now we're really in trouble," he declared.

"Why?" asked Palfrey, huskily.

"There are brittle trees in Washington," the sheriff announced. "We had a telephone call about it half an

hour ago. One of the boxes we sent was opened by mistake; maybe that's why."

Palfrey said very heavily: "So it looks as if the blight *is* contagious."

"It surely does," said the sheriff. He perched on the side of a table as he went on: "If there's a light wherever the Christmas Valley visitors have gone, we should know by tomorrow—*if* it does attack the trees in only forty-eight hours." His hobgoblin face had a hint of ghoulish merriment in it. "I'm full of ifs and buts. Still want to go to All Seasons Canyon?"

"More than ever," Palfrey said. "Is there any word from the man Harmon?"

"Nothing."

"How soon can we start?"

"The chopper's ready," reported the sheriff. "If I could have some of your coffee we could be on the way in half an hour."

"And the pilot?"

"I'm the pilot."

Palfrey smiled faintly.

But as he walked across the road and past the Administration Building his smile vanished. About the building there were some silver firs, a cedar of Lebanon, a cedar deodorous—all trees with which he was familiar. There were ornamental trees, too; a cryptomeria japonica, some cypresses which were like enormous Christmas trees with low branches sweeping out almost at ground level.

Branches from all of these littered the ground. One lawson cypress lurched against a wooden shed marked STORES. There was an air of indescribable desolation. As they climbed into the helicopter and a mechanic moved to see them off, Palfrey saw that the whole area was like a field of green wheat or barley after a violent storm. Great swathes had been cut in the

massed stands and the ground was littered with debris. In other places whole rows of trees leaned against barriers of wreckage. Yet it could be seen that more trees were standing than were felled, and it was almost impossible to believe that the standing ones were already dead, they looked so green and sturdy.

The sun rose above the dark, eastern mountains, gilding the snow-covered peaks, spreading an eerie light over the lower slopes and on to the foliage which covered them. The valleys were still dark to the east, but in the south the full light of morning shone upon hills and mountains, rivers and streams.

Palfrey, sitting at the sheriff's side, with his long legs stretched out, looked about him in all directions. Over on the southwest was a sheet of water which appeared to be narrow, but was probably twenty miles across. Beyond this were mountains and a valley with sides which looked as if some fantastic giant had bitten jagged pieces out of them.

"That's the Canyon of All Seasons," Pike told him. "The lake's at the entrance to it you can see, and there are rapids in the river which comes over the fall and drops into the lake. That's what makes the canyon so inaccessible. Ever been up to the Grand Tetons, in Wyoming?"

Palfrey nodded.

"Rather like All Seasons Canyon—except that there aren't any Indian tribes or reservations in All Seasons." The sheriff was positive. "I sure would like to know where those vacationing fishermen are."

"What's in your mind about them?" demanded Palfrey.

"That lake looks like a mirror from here, but it can be wild in a storm. If they were out in a boat they might never get back. More than one party of fishermen has disappeared into that lake. We'll soon see

their tent," he added, narrowing his eyes. "Should see them waving, too. And we ought to see the mini-jeep Harmon came in. Keep your eyes open, won't you?"

"Wide open," Palfrey promised.

Down near the lake in a clearing made by last night's storm, Harmon heard the helicopter and took off his shirt, to wave. He did not know how far he had come, and could not be sure whether the murderers were near or far.

He was sure of one thing: they could hear the engine too.

CHAPTER 8

The Fugitive

All Palfrey could see were the trees and the mirror-like surface of the lake. The helicopter was flying at about a thousand feet, which restricted the area of vision. A few hundred yards up-river was the waterfall which fed the lake but from here it looked little more than a trickle.

"Don't see a boat, do you?" the sheriff asked.

"No. Nor a tent."

"Tent would be on this side, we wouldn't see it yet. There's not much damage near here."

"Apparently not," said Palfrey. "How far into the canyon can you fly?"

"Not far. The currents make it too dangerous. There's a landing area a mile or so beyond the top of the falls. Higher than that everything is taken by boat, mule pack or on foot—even the mini-jeeps don't like it here. Not that I know much about it in the past three years," the sheriff went on, ruefully. "They might have put in some roads since I was last here. And Rakowitz didn't talk much." He glanced sideways at Palfrey. "You've got a reputation for being a fair-minded man, Dr. Palfrey."

"What is making you wonder whether the reputation is justified?"

Pike observed, staring straight ahead: "Dr.Rakowitz and Professor Winstanley were alone for a long time."

"And we've only the Professor's word for it that Rakowitz took the tablets voluntarily."

"You're fair-minded," decided the sheriff. "How well do you know the Professor?"

"I met him for the first time two days ago. I also wonder what's under his skin—just as I wonder why Sanderson is so edgy."

"So you also noticed that."

"I noticed it," said Palfrey. "I don't understand—"

He broke off, for the sheriff's body seemed to snap to sudden attention as he peered towards the north, hand at his eyes to keep off the slanting rays of the sun, reflected from the lake. Palfrey looked in the same direction but saw nothing. The other made no comment but turned the helicopter round slowly and gained a hundred feet or so in height. Palfrey kept staring—then saw a movement in a clearing where there were no trees.

"See him?" asked the sheriff.

"Someone's waving."

"Harmon."

"Can you be sure?"

"I'd recognise that head of hair anywhere. Can you see his mini-jeep?"

"No," answered Palfrey.

"Or the fishermen?"

"No," Palfrey said—and then he caught sight of movement near the edge of the lake, and added: "I'm not sure, though. There might be—there *is* a man! Yes—two or three of them. They seem to be hiding among the trees."

"Hiding? Why should they hide?" barked Pike.

Palfrey didn't comment but continued to watch closely.

"One is carrying a rifle," he announced.

"Everyone who's anyone carries a shotgun or a

hunting rifle out here," Pike answered. His eyes were narrowed and steel-bright. "There's another guy, *he's* hiding, also." The helicopter was hovering and turning round slowly. "Can you see Harmon?"

"Yes–if that *is* the man waving."

"That's Harmon," confirmed the sheriff. "And the others–"

He broke off. There was no sound, but a puff of smoke showed just in front of one of the men who had his rifle at his shoulder. Harmon looked round, as if in desperation, and his waving grew wilder. *Hurry, hurry, hurry!* he seemed to be saying. *Hurry, hurry, hurry!*

"They're shooting at him," Pike was quite cool and calm. "Dr. Palfrey, will you lower the ladder? The winch is–"

"I know the drill." Palfrey moved out of his seat, checked the belly-doors of the helicopter, and found the opening lever. A current of air shot in, quite cold. Once the doors were open the ladder was unhooked and Palfrey began to lower it. The wind whipped it to and fro. He could only see the trees, somehow Pike would have to locate the fugitive among them. He thought he heard two cracks of sound. Were they shots? Or breaking trees? Suddenly the aircraft lurched, and he saw a man with the fair, curly hair. His face was upturned and he was waving a shirt wildly to and fro. His mouth was wide open as if he were shouting but there was no hope of hearing him.

Pike said: "I'm going down."

"Stay over this spot."

"O.K." The engine seemed to roar more loudly as the helicopter hovered. Palfrey knelt by the opening, watching the swaying ends of the rope-ladder and seeing the man's arms stretched up towards them.

He heard a different crack of sound, and a curious

rattling. Two similar sounds puzzled him, then he saw a mark appear on the glass; the men below were shooting at the helicopter. He gritted his teeth as the machine hovered still lower—and at last Harmon grabbed it. Palfrey waited until he was gripping the second rung, then called: "Make height, Sheriff!"

As he spoke he began to winch the rope up. The machine began to gain height. Harmon was swaying, and trying desperately to climb higher. A bullet seemed to strike the ladder, another was only an inch from Palfrey's hand.

Harmon managed to haul himself near enough for Palfrey to lean out to try to help him. The trees seemed to get further away now, and suddenly he was able to see the men who were attacking. There were four of them, small men, all with rifles at their shoulders; but they were out of range.

Palfrey gripped Harmon's wrist, and began to haul him up. He noticed how very pale the man's eyes were, and how close-knit were his curls. Then Harmon scrambled in, and rolled to one side. Palfrey winched the ladder up and closed the doors. Harmon lay breathing heavily, his eyes half-closed.

"Give him some coffee," the sheriff ordered.

Palfrey picked up a vacuum flask, unscrewed it and started to pour. Harmon's eyes opened wider, and he managed to sit up. There was no colour at all in his cheeks. Palfrey pulled a blanket round him and helped him hold the cup.

"You'll be all right."

"I could—eat."

"Biscuits," Palfrey said, and then corrected himself. "Cookies."

"Biscuits or cookies—all the same—to me," muttered Harmon. He took two cookies and ate very slowly,

gradually taking more notice. He looked at Pike's back and said: "Thanks, Sheriff."

"Forget it." Pike did not look round. "Were they the fishermen?"

"They murdered the fishermen last night."

"*Murdered?*"

"Cut their throats. I saw them, they didn't see me."

"Have to have some luck," remarked the sheriff, drily. "Who are they?"

"I don't know."

"Would you recognise them again?"

"No, sir. Last night it was dark, this morning I didn't see them at all—they only started shooting when you spotted me." Harmon was already looking better and actually essayed a smile. "I volunteered to come. I'm not blaming you."

"Thanks," said the sheriff. "Any idea what it's all about?"

"No idea at all. I was a couple of miles from the lake yesterday afternoon when my mini-jeep broke down. It was dark when I saw the fishermen's fire—I can almost smell that trout now." Harmon gulped. "I could use more coffee . . . thanks. Have *you* any idea what it's all about, Sheriff?"

"Don't ask me, ask Dr. Palfrey."

Harmon said in a shocked tone: "*Who?*"

"Dr. Palfrey."

"I'm Palfrey," Palfrey said pleasantly. "Does the name ring a bell?"

"It certainly does," Harmon said in a strained voice. "I heard it several times the night before last. A man who was at the chalet—but you don't know—" he broke off, at a loss for words.

"I've told him," said Pike, briskly.

"There was this man who died at the chalet," Har-

mon went on. "Johnny Woll. The night before he died he asked me to send a message to a Dr. Palfrey—Dr. S. A. Palfrey of London, England. The message was: 'Would you come and check what's happening in Christmas Valley.' He said it was very urgent, and he faked a quarrel with me because he wanted the others in the chalet to think we were at each other's throats. He was going to make his own way out of the valley. And you—*you're* Dr. S. A. Palfrey?"

"From London, England," Palfrey confirmed. "Have a nip of brandy in that." He poured out from a flask into the steaming coffee and momentarily the bouquet was stronger even than the fumes from the engine. "As soon as you've told me all you can, you can go to sleep."

As he talked, Harmon's exhaustion seemed to overtake him, but he talked cogently enough. He had come here on his own, he said, because his wife had died during the past winter; they had come to Christmas Valley for their summer vacation ever since their honeymoon, ten years before.

He finished the coffee and went on in a firmer voice: "There were five others here—this Johnny Woll, two girls named Pru and Isobel, and the Thomases. At first I was all for the Thomases—they were on a delayed honeymoon. But Clive began to bother me, he hated me so much."

The heart of the story was that Johnny Woll had called him aside and told him he was in acute danger, whether from someone in the chalet or in the village, Woll couldn't be sure.

"And he asked me to cable you, in London. I thought he was crazy—S.A. Palfrey, London; and just say that there was something you ought to see in the valley. Then he asked me to pick a quarrel with him. In fact he picked it with me."

"Why should he do that?" Palfrey asked.

"He said that if it was anyone in the chalet and they heard me quarrelling, they wouldn't suspect I was helping him." Harmon threw up his hands in a helpless gesture. "He wasn't sure of any of them."

"What made you go along with all this?"

"You should have heard Woll," said Harmon.

"Tell me something before you go on. Why did Woll trust *you?*"

"I asked him that, too, "answered Harmon. "He said the affair was too dangerous, he wouldn't involve the girls or Thomas, who was on his honeymoon. And he had to trust *someone*—he believed he might be killed before he could get out of the valley."

"Did he say why?"

"No—only that he had been attacked already."

"Did *you* drop that bar into its slots at the chalet?" demanded Sheriff Pike, heavily.

Harmon answered without hesitation:

"Yes, sir. Woll had gone, and there *are* bears in the valley. I went off to sleep again, and didn't wake until Deidre Thomas screamed. If you want to know why I lied to you—"

"I want to know," interpolated Pike grimly.

"Woll said an official in the valley was involved. It could have been you."

Sheriff Pike glanced meaningly at Palfrey, as if to say: "And it could have been Rakowitz."

All the time Harmon had been telling his story, Sheriff Pike had been hovering at about a thousand feet. As silence fell between Palfrey and Harmon, he twisted round in his seat and said:

"We could fly up the canyon and see if we can find out what's there. Do you want to do that?"

"What are the risks?" asked Palfrey.

"On a morning like this there aren't any risks—un-

less they've got rifles that carry a long way. We have to fly across the lake and over the rapids."

"Have we enough fuel?"

"Fuel? Oh, gas! Sure, I guess so."

"Let's go," said Palfrey.

He half-expected Harmon to doze. Instead, the younger man sat up and squatted on a crate containing cans of beer. The sun reflected dazzlingly from the lake, as well as from the falls. As they drew nearer the face of the falls, their height and force became more apparent; when the helicopter flew over them the roaring sounded very loud. Palfrey on one side and Harmon on the other saw how the mouth of the Canyon of All Seasons was blocked by the torrent of water; there was no possible entrance here, only from the sides. As they flew on, the walls of the canyon closed in on them for half a mile or so, before it widened dramatically; to Palfrey it seemed like a miniature Grand Canyon. The rock strata, the odours, the light and shade, were startling in their beauty—but even more remarkable were the trees.

This was the first time Palfrey had seen trees here without evidence of the devastation. *All* were sturdy and upright, and even from this height he could see the different kinds at the different altitudes. There were areas which looked like sand dunes with trees growing out of them; there were narrow terraces like the terraced vineyards of the Rhine and Moselle Valley, and like those of the mountains of Andalusia and of Portugal.

In the centre of a stretch of grassland was a cluster of cabins, and there were more cabins on ledges one side of the canyon. Some of these were near what looked like dark holes in the wall of the canyon. Two or three slipways obviously served to keep boats under cover. Several small outboard motor-boats were

moored to narrow piers. At one spot there were piles of water-skis, umbrellas, tables and cabanas; it was a riverside resort in miniature.

"Indian caves," Pike told Palfrey and Harmon. "There were cave-dwellers here five hundred years ago." He began to swing the helicopter round. "Time we went back," he continued. "You see that Rakowitz and his men have done quite a job, Dr. Palfrey."

"Yes. If he hadn't killed himself—"

Harmon started violently.

"Did you say Rakowitz *killed* himself?"

"Yes."

"Not on your life," Harmon declared. "There were a lot of things Karl Rakowitz would do but he would never run away from anything. He certainly didn't commit suicide."

"How well do you know him?" Palfrey asked sharply.

"Well enough to be sure he would do everything he could to save his beloved trees," answered Harmon. "I can tell you something else, Doc."

"Yes?" Palfrey said.

"Johnny Woll wanted you to see Rakowitz. He said Rakowitz had information he would tell you but wouldn't tell anyone else in the world. If Rakowitz died it wasn't suicide—someone killed him to make sure he didn't pass that information on. The problem is—*who* killed him?"

"And is the murderer still in Christmas Valley?" asked the sheriff.

CHAPTER 9

The Spread of the Blight

The helicopter landed smoothly on the field near the Administration Building, and mechanics trotted forward to help Harmon down. He needed little help, although the stimulus of the excitement had faded and he looked exhausted. The youthful-looking man from the sheriff's office came striding across the field. Palfrey watched him as he watched everybody, with close attention cloaked by an air of unconcern, almost of disinterest. He had seldom seen a man move with such flowing strides, and in spite of the almost babyish face there was a hint of strength about this young man.

"Morning, Tom," Sheriff Pike said. "What's your hurry?"

"There are a lot of messages for Dr. Palfrey, sir."

"I dare say Dr. Palfrey can wait five minutes for them, but if he feels as hungry as I do he can't wait five seconds for breakfast."

The man smiled and drew back.

"Dr. Palfrey," said the sheriff, "you haven't met my deputy properly, have you? This is Tom Blessing."

"Blessing?" Palfrey was startled into echoing.

The younger man smiled.

"It's quite a name to take round," he said. "One message asks you to get in touch with your office in London urgently."

"How long will it take to put a call through?"

"A line is being kept open for you, sir."

"Then I'll talk to my office at once," Palfrey said, "I'll join you at the restaurant, Sheriff."

"If you can wait I can."

"We need to find out where Clive and Deidre Thomas went to, as well as those two girls," went on Palfrey.

"You will start the inquiries. And Tom—Mr Harmon needs a shower, and breakfast, and a lot of sleep."

"I'll arrange it," promised Tom. "All except the sleep."

There was a twinkle in the sheriff's eyes, as if he was trying to say: "You can't out-talk Tom Blessing." Blessing led the way to the sheriff's office; in the streets a few middle-aged and elderly men stood about, watching. There were no children in sight, no one dressed as toursists.

"Where's everybody?" the sheriff asked.

"All the rangers are out in the forest checking the trees, and hoping to find some sound ones," said Tom Blessing. "They'll be back by nightfall."

Pike nodded and turned towards the restaurant. Palfrey turned in the other direction. Tom Blessing led the way to the office set aside for Palfrey. There were at least two dozen slips of paper beneath a polished wooden paperweight. Palfrey sat at the desk and lifted the telephone with one hand and the paperweight with the other.

"Dial 101," said Tom.

The operator answered at once.

"Dr. Palfrey—" Palfrey began.

"Wait, just one minute, Dr. Palfrey, there is someone waiting on the line from London. They've been holding since seven-thirty." There were clicks on the

line and then, very clearly and unmistakably, Joyce's voice.

"Is that you, Sap?"

"Yes."

"How quickly can you get back to London?"

"Today, if I must, but I'd rather spend several days here. What's the trouble there?"

"There is a meeting of delegates from most European states," Joyce told him. "The blight is beginning to kill the trees all over Europe."

And it was so.

In the village of Shapley, in Wiltshire, England, a child ran joyfully across a lawn in the rare sunshine of summer, and sprang towards a swing hanging from the bough of a spreading oak. The branch collapsed, the child screamed, the dust rose. The mother watching out of the window, ran in fear, for the branch was big enough to crush a dozen men. Alarm faded into astonishment as the child picked himself up and stared down at the small sections of the tree, at the tiny fragments and at the still green leaves.

"That branch was rotten," she said, puzzled.

"Mummy, can I put the swing on the other side?"

"Yes. Here, I'll help you." They picked up the board with the rope attached and carried it round to another branch that was easy to reach. The woman, young and comely, flushed from running but quite happy again, tossed the end of the rope over the bough.

The bough broke and the wood shattered and the dust rose.

In the tropical heat of Malaya, near a village where the people still lived in a tribal fashion, sharing a communal home in the custom handed down through the

years, was a rubber-plantation owned by a co-operative of village people and a rubber company domiciled in Australia and Singapore. From the village a dozen men set out in an old truck, naked except for short khaki pants. Along the uneven road men walked towards the plantations, while trucks rattled and swayed. It was very warm, and as the trucks stopped the skies opened and a deluge of rain thrashed down. Everyone rushed to the trucks for shelter, while for a few minutes the road and the plantation were deserted.

The rain stopped and the sun came out and shone fiercely, water poured along the sides of the road and the steam rose up, while sweat rolled down the faces, the bodies and the legs of the Malays.

A whistle blew.

The workers moved towards the trees which stood in straight rows, each trunk slender and smooth, each with a cup tied to it to catch the latex from the cuts made in them in previous days. The two main tasks were to cut trees which had not been tapped for some time, and to fasten a cup round them; and to empty filled cups into containers which would be taken on trolleys to the trucks parked on the road, and put the cups back.

No one was prepared for anything different to this methodical routine.

One man took out his panga knife and took a shaving off the bark two feet above the previous cut—the new one on a level with his chin. Finished, he leaned against the tree—and the tree fell. He stared at it stupidly as did the others. Then the man laughed and flexed his muscles, to draw attention to his strength, before cutting another tree.

The second tree fell.

Slowly, filled with awe, other men began timidly to slash, only to find the trees toppling and powdering.

It was uncanny, like a visitation; and fear struck deep into all of them. An Englishman driving along the road saw the fallen trees, stopped his car and jumped out. As he rushed towards the scene of 'sabotage' he banged against a tree. It had no resistance and it toppled.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "My *God*."

The Malays were slowly backing away from the scene, frightened as by evil spirits.

In the great forests of Kaloomba in Australia's Blue Mountains, lumber-jacks went to work in big trucks, hearty, powerful men, wearing slouch hats and colourful shirts. They were unshaven and uncouth, handling their chain saws and their axes as if they were extra arms and legs. They broke camp soon after dawn and set out for the place where they were felling. The eucalyptus, in great variety, stood tall and slender. Here and there massive ghost gums, the bark stripped from the trunks, showed white and eerie. Bark hung in streamers over branches and gathered in thick festoons on the ground. Here and there trees were lying flat, a few reeled like drunken men against one another.

One man remarked: "We were through here yesterday, sport."

"So what, Cully?"

"Those trees were O.K. then."

"You want your eyes seen to."

"I tell you they were all right," the first man insisted. He turned off the path ahead of the others and stood by a tree which had fallen against a rock. "It's broken, you can see that."

"Don't be a fool," said the other. "You must be crook."

"But—look." The first man pointed to the fresh crack

across the trunk. "Someone's been playing around. I—"

He broke off as a wallaby, scared by the noise, bounded off with long graceful jumps. It touched a tree in passing.

The tree began to fall.

"So *I'm* crook," the first man said in a strained voice. "Or maybe those trees are."

Big, brawny men were silenced and awed by what they saw—and they pushed trees over at a touch.

The first one said hoarsely: "If this goes on we won't have any timber left in the State, and we need that timber."

In the great forests of New Zealand the same thing happened; the sawmills at Roturua fell silent, for there was no wood to saw.

In the pine forests of Scandinavia, in the Black Forest of Germany, in the Forêt de Bordeaux, in the foothills of the Himalayas, in the larch woods of Austria, in the fir plantations of Scotland—everywhere, trees collapsed at a touch.

Men who lived by the trees were the first to feel the fear.

Soon, others became aware of it . . .

In the Vale of Evesham in the English Midlands, a fruit farmer woke on a bright morning, heard the cocks crowing and the birds chattering, and was aware of the promise of a summer's day. He stretched and yawned, got quietly out of bed, glancing at his sleeping wife, went down the twisting stairs, and was welcomed by a terrier, frisking. Quite oblivious of any difference between this morning and others, he made tea, fed the dog, drew on a pair of trousers and boots, and went out to see his orchards.

The cherries could be picked today.

At eight o'clock, two teams of schoolboy labour and one of holidaying labour were due, and with luck half of his trees would be stripped. The round wicker baskets were stacked at the corners of the field, a dozen ladders rested against a gate. There was enough haze in the distance to make it reasonably safe to predict that the weather would hold until nightfall.

He strolled to the nearest tree, stretched up to pick a pair of cherries—and found the twig gave way. He was surprised but not in any way alarmed. He put the cherries into his mouth and pulled. The stalks did not come out of the eye of the cherry, but just broke; and the fruit was bone dry inside the shiny skin.

Dry.

Suddenly the fruit farmer began to feel alarm.

He reached up for a higher bunch of cherries, missed his footing and slipped. He fell against the tree, and it toppled and powdered. The fruit from it lay on the dusty grass, mocking him with a delusion of lusciousness.

"My God!" he breathed. "My *God!*"

He walked slowly, fearfully to a tree halfway across the orchard and it fell too.

"My *God!*" he repeated in a strained voice, then he turned and ran towards the house. "Mary!" he called to his wife. "Mary!" As he neared the house she appeared at the window, greying hair tousled, face shiny, eyes dimmed with sleep.

"Joe, what is it? *Joe!*"

"There's rot in the trees," he cried. "There's no fruit!"

And there was no fruit, any place where fruit trees grew.

Palfrey looked out of the window of the astro-jet which had brought him across the Atlantic, seeing for the first time how much woodland there was even so near London. All the way across from southern Ireland and southwest England he had seen the woods and the orchards, the copses and the spinneys, and he had been afraid. More messages had reached him by radio but none of the news was good. He had all the reports which Joyce had cabled, and the irony was bitter indeed. The early news from the agents had been negative, but within hours cancellations had arrived and now there was a stream from all over the world, telling of the spread of the blight.

As the aircraft circled before landing, he saw a little colony of houses near the reservoirs and two small children came running out of one of the houses. They disappeared beneath a tree which looked like a beech.

Another tree fell.

The second engineer came along the gangway to see him.

"Your car's at the runway, sir," he said. "You won't need to be cleared through customs."

"Good," Palfrey said mechanically.

"May I ask a question?"

"Go ahead."

"Is your mission something to do with trees?'"

"Yes."

"Something damned odd happening to them, isn't there? I had a funny report from some friends in New York State. They run a peach farm."

Palfrey grunted.

"The fruit went rotten on the trees—shook the living daylight out of my friends, sir."

"It would shake the living daylights out of anyone," Palfrey said.

"You know how it is with aircraft, sir."

"In what way?"

"Pilots and crew chat to one another part of the time, over the air."

"What's everyone been talking about this time?" demanded Palfrey.

"These trees. A 'plane from Cannes reported some funny incidents in the Basse Alpes. Chap down from Trondheim—Norway, sir—said they'd had a spot of bother, too. The trouble's pretty widespread, isn't it?"

Palfrey said: "That's what I'm going to find out."

Ten minutes later he was in the back of a limousine and heading for London. Two motor-cycle escorts cleared the way to and along the Great West Road, over the flyovers, through Knightsbridge and past Buckingham Palace.

In Green Park and in St. James's Park, trees had fallen. Police and park-keepers were cordoning off the dangerous area. Two platoons of soldiers came marching along, then stopped by one of the entrances from the Mall and went in to help.

"Pretty widespread, isn't it, sir? . . . Scared the living daylights out of my friends."

The men waiting to see him would be scared men, too.

CHAPTER 10

Delegates from All Nations

The Meeting was in the Conference Hall of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries in a street leading off Whitehall. One of Palfrey's office assistants was waiting at the entrance, another just inside the hall. The double doors were opened cautiously for him to go through, and he heard a man speaking from the rostrum in a low-pitched voice difficult to hear even over the microphone.

Joyce Morgan was sitting just by the door. She looked up, and promptly indicated an empty chair beside her. Palfrey sat down. No one else glanced towards him, all being intent on the speaker. Palfrey recognised him as M. Anton Maillard of the European Market Secretariat. Maillard was no fool, and he was always listened to with great respect.

". . . there can be no question, gentlemen, of the great seriousness of the situation. One thinks of trees as charming, isolated things, pleasing to the eye—one forgets their fundamental service to mankind; as wood, a basic material; as pulp, for paper and in a dozen, a hundred different secondary products; as the providers of food. I have with me—" he held up a bulging briefcase—"reports from the fruit growing areas, not only of France and the Western European nations but from the Eastern nations. There is disaster everywhere. All fruit trees, all olive trees, *even the vines* are suffering.

The blight strikes without warning. And it strikes at the source not only of our prosperity, but of our very life."

He paused; and a man from the body of the hall called:

"*Who is doing this? Who wishes to destroy the world in such a way?*"

A man demanded in a guttural voice: "That I wish to know."

"Hear, hear," called a man whom Palfrey noticed. It was Lord Wolhampton, of the Wolhampton Corporation.

"There's no evidence that this is caused by man," another said.

"Gentlemen, please," reproved Osborn, who was in the chair. "Allow M. Maillard to complete his statement."

There was a rustle of approval.

"I have very little more to say," declared Maillard, as if aware the remark was an anti-climax. "It *is* possible that there is a political motivation in this series of disasters. It is equally possible that there is a natural cause—and there is no evidence that there has been no intervention from outer space."

Someone laughed.

Someone gasped.

"The man most likely to answer these questions is on his way," Maillard announced. "Dr. Palfrey will soon be here, I understand. He was the first to alert us to the dangers of the situation. I—"

Osborn was whispering at the speaker's side. Maillard stopped, peered towards the end of the hall, and then sat down abruptly. Osborn rose, in the other's place.

"If you will come forward, Dr. Palfrey . . ."

Palfrey rose at once and moved along the middle aisle towards the platform. A hushed silence settled

over the gathering of at least two hundred men. As he passed, every head turned, many nodding with approval. He took long strides, his shoulders slightly rounded, his head erect, his eyes looked straight ahead. A man clapped; immediately there was an outburst of applause which continued until he was on the platform. Sensing the anxiety of everyone present to hear Palfrey, Osborn simply motioned to him and then to the microphone. Palfrey stood in front of it, poker-faced, appreciating the signs of his popularity, at the same time wishing there was none.

He raised his hands in a self-deprecatory gesture and the clapping slackened and gradually stopped. He began to speak at once in a clear but conversational manner, very different from Maillard's oratorical approach.

"Thank you, gentlemen . . . I am sorry to be late . . . The first manifestation of this tree blight to be brought to Z5's notice was in northern California, and I was asked to go there immediately. I must say that it was worse, very much worse, than I had feared."

He paused; but no one spoke or moved.

"It was so serious that one of the finest and most valuable forests in the United States of America had been destroyed," he went on. "And as you already know the destruction is widespread in many parts of the world—so widespread that it is not only an acute threat to both eastern and western Europe but to all mankind. As far as I can judge from the reports received, no continent and no country of any size is wholly free. So far no way is known of checking the spread of the disease, and there are no indications that it will leave any extensive area unaffected." He paused again, then added: "I am sorry to be so depressing, gentlemen."

A man called out: "How did this thing begin?"

"I think it began in Christmas Valley in northern California," Palfrey answered. "There is some evidence that a man who hoped to find the secret of speeding-up the growth of trees, unleashed a way of ageing them in this phenomenal way. That isn't yet certain—it is barely three days since the first intimation reached me—but it is all we have to work on." An American called out incredulously: "It was an *accident?*"

"It may have been an accidental by-product of a fertiliser intended to promote rapid growth," Palfrey said. "We have arranged intensive research. Specialists in tree diseases from most of the forest areas are working under pressure. National as well as commercial laboratories are at our disposal. We know we might get help from Christmas Valley and before I left I arranged for the American authorities to search the valley—part of which is almost inaccessible."

"Supposing it *isn't* an accident," Lord Wolhampton asked.

Palfrey said: "We are looking into all possibilities, of course. It is conceivable that it has economic or military significance but it isn't very likely. The blight spreads everywhere. So far it's gone like lightning, even the oceans haven't checked it. If any nation were free from it we might suspect them but—would *any* nation set out to destroy such natural resources? There is little military significance in trees, even though forests are part of the wealth of the world. By destroying them one inflicts permanent damage on national economy, however. It doesn't seem reasonable that any nation or any group of people would set out to destroy forests in this way—"

"It's not *im*possible," a man called in a high-pitched voice; Palfrey recognised Vittoretto, of Rome.

"Not impossible," agreed Palfrey. "Nor is it impossible—as you've already heard—that it has come from

outer space." He heard the intake of breath, felt a sense of horror, paused, and heard a Chinese speak in precise, accentuated English:

"You believe that is really possible, please?"

"We keep sending space-craft, satellites and probes of all kinds into space," Palfrey answered. "We can't be sure they don't create some atmospheric change which affects the trees. Our astronauts come back safely and our scientists assure us there is no need to fear, but they could be wrong. So, every space centre, every landing-site, every known place where anything has returned from outer space, is being checked. I sent the instructions from the aircraft on my way back. And agents in all forest areas are looking for trees which are not affected—that might give us the secret of the blight and we might have some areas. However—" he paused.

"What is the worst we can expect?" called a Brazilian.

"The worst—that the world will be denuded of trees in the next few weeks," Palfrey answered bluntly. "Wood will have to be replaced by some synthetic material but obviously fruit cannot be. Paper will have to be made of plastic and out of other raw maertials. We shall find it difficult to adjust to a world without wood, but let us hope, not impossible."

He stopped.

It was the American who had called out: "It was an *accident?*" who spoke again, half-rising from his chair as he said:

"Will this blight affect other vegetable matter, Dr. Palfrey? Will it affect crops of vegetables and cereals?'

Palfrey said bleakly: "All I can say is that it hasn't yet. It hasn't affected seasoned wood, either. There seems a reasonable possibility that the wood of growing trees—greenwood—is particularly vulnerable but

that other plant life isn't. If there is the slightest indication that food crops are being attacked we shall be warned at once."

"But what could we *do?*" demanded the American helplessly.

Palfrey said: "We may be anticipating a situation which will not come about. On the other hand we could soon come face to face with an acute food shortage. All stocks of processed and preserved foods should be guarded closely and I recommend that strict rationing be applied at once."

"But that will cause panic!" Maillard cried.

"What good would it do except keep us going for a few weeks?" Osborne asked from Palfrey's side. "If it attacks crops and we cannot replenish stocks, then starvation will face us in any case."

The hush which fell over the hall was not broken for a long time. And then a man said in a deep Irish brogue:

"*All we can do is pray.*"

Palfrey said to Joyce: "He's not far wrong, Joyce."

"Sap, do you really think—" she broke off for a moment as they sat back in a car heading for Mayfair and the headquarters of Z5. "Do you really think all vegetable matter could be affected?"

"All living organic matter could be, obviously," Palfrey said. "We've more urgent anxieties, though. We need a statement for the Press about the trees, we need to analyse the reports as they come in, we want to find out if any species of tree is naturally immune from the blight." He looked out of the window as they drove round Leicester Square, and saw a once stalwart oak lying in pieces across a path. Old men stood staring at this death of a tree they had sheltered under all their lives. "And above all we've got to find

out what's causing the drying out. It's a form of dehydration like we had once before.* What did Wolhampton say when you talked to him?"

"That he will help in any way he can," Joyce answered.

"We want him and all research people on the job. We must strike an optimistic note with the Press, too." Palfrey added.

"I half-expected you to do that at the meeting."

"Those people had to be scared," Palfrey said. "But we needn't scare the general public more than we have to."

"I think you'll find they're scared enough already," Joyce said.

And that was true.

Throughout the land there was alarm as well as bewilderment. Those who had some understanding of the economic position were appalled by the fresh evidence, while those who saw simply trees as things of beauty were horrified at their destruction as they fell under the lightest of blows. The plane trees along London's embankments, the oaks and birch on commons, the flowering trees in the parks, the graceful elms and the spreading chestnuts, the sycamore, and the ash all fell easy victims to wind or touch. Familiar landmarks which had been known for centuries disappeared on the instant from man's sight.

The parks were bare.

The woods and the forests began to wither.

"Sap," Joyce Morgan said, in a rather sharp voice, "I've never known you like this."

"No," said Palfrey, "I've never been like this."

"Almost from the beginning of the case you've seemed—hopeless."

* See *The Drought.*

"I feel hopeless."

"But you've faced situations which were just as bad!"

"Possibly just as bad," Palfrey corrected.

"If the blight doesn't touch the other vegetation this won't be absolute disaster."

"No," Palfrey admitted, "not absolute." He moved along the passage towards his office-cum-study, and opened the door. With that single action he switched on the artificial daylight in the room—a room in which the polished mahogany held the rich glow which only wood seemed to possess. He moved to a corner cupboard and motioned to a chair. "Sit down, Joyce." She sat down and crossed her legs, smoothing her skirt and then her dark hair. She was slim and had a nice figure, a thoughtful rather than a provocative face, and dark blue eyes which followed Palfrey's every movement. She had loved him, as he knew, for many years; and probably she always would. But the passion had eased and would not surge again unless the simple affection he felt for her should change.

He poured out—gin and tonic for Joyce, whisky and soda for himself.

"Cheers."

They sipped.

"Sap," she said again. "You're not really fighting."

"I'm thinking," Palfrey retorted, almost resentfully.

"You seem almost frightened."

"Yes," Palfrey admitted. "I think I am."

"Do you know more than you've told anyone else?" Joyce demanded.

"No," Palfrey assured her. "I told the meeting everything. What appals me is the speed of the disaster."

"Yes, but—"

"Joyce," he said, "seventy-two hours ago no one

had heard of the blight. It obviously affects the trees so quickly that it's *new*—if it had been dormant in the trees some atmospheric condition would have triggered it off before now. How could it have spread so fast? How could it cross oceans and traverse mountains?" He drank more deeply and began to move about. "From the beginning, the one predominant step was to isolate it, but *we hadn't a chance*. It was as if it were a blight transmitted by the sun or the moon or the stars."

"Sap, *you* don't believe that."

"No," Palfrey said gruffly. "I don't believe it. I don't believe any known natural agency could have distributed the blight so swiftly, either. Much more likely, it was released in every part of the world at the same time. If that's so, and it seems certain, then there are the agents of distribution everywhere. All over England, over Europe, over each continent. Who are those agents, Joyce? What do they want—unless they are bent on absolute destruction? How can one begin to fight them when the damage they do is already done?" He paused again and when he went on there was added bitterness in his voice. "There's another fact we can't ignore. It was done before we had any inkling. No single agent hinted at the blight. I've been through every report we've had from every source for the past two months. Not a sentence could be construed as a warning. The first came three days ago—and that wasn't really a warning. It was an announcement of disaster. Johnny Woll, who worked for us on one specific job a year ago, was the first to try to warn us—and he was killed."

There was a long pause, before Palfrey spun round on Joyce and demanded: "*Now* do you see what's biting into me? With all our vaunted achievements, our supra-national organisation, everything exactly as

it should be in theory, an absolutely fool-proof system of warnings—nothing comes through. *Now* do you see why I am not only puzzled, I'm frightened? Now do you see why this is the worst thing that's ever happened to Z5 and to everything we stand for? If we're so helpless, then the world is helpless too."

CHAPTER 11

The Catalyst

Joyce Morgan finished her drink, put her glass down, moved to Palfrey and stood close to him. Her blue eyes were vivid and touched with anger, giving her a look of defiance. He studied her, sensing the intensity of her feeling, knowing the degree of her integrity. She was going to say something he didn't like. In some moods this would amuse him, in others it would infuriate him. And he was not in a good mood.

"I didn't think the time would come when I'd be ashamed of you," she said.

He tightened his lips but kept silent.

"And I am," she said. "You've lost your grip."

He gritted his teeth.

"You've faced worse disasters than this and never thought of giving up. Now you're not even fighting. You *have* given up."

"Joyce," said Palfrey stiffly, "I am going to think this out. I'll send for you when I want you. I don't want any interruptions."

"That's your way of running away from the truth," Joyce said harshly. "You may not like it, you may hate me for saying it, but you *have* given up. You haven't produced a single worthwhile idea since you heard of the blight. You've simply applied routine measures. What on earth happened to you in California?"

"Joyce," Palfrey said roughly, "I don't want to discuss it."

"You want to turn your back on it because you feel bitter and defeated. Your pride's been hurt. You spend your life building up a magnificent organisation, you persuade every country to join in, you're the *great* Dr. Palfrey to every nation in the world—and suddenly this beloved organisation has turned sour on you. So what happens? You *sulk!*"

Palfrey caught his breath.

"In half a minute you'll be telling me not to dare to talk to you like that—you're already standing so much on your dignity that it will hurt you to get off."

"Joyce, don't say another word." Palfrey's voice was like ice. "Go to your office and—"

"If I go out of this office now I shall never come back," Joyce said, looking as if she meant precisely that. "If you've become a man who can't suffer disappointment or defeat I don't want to work for you. I *won't* work for you!"

Her eyes sparked and her whole body was tense. Palfrey had never seen her like it, never believed her capable of such passion. One part of him was aquiver with fuming resentment; the other part, the detached and dispassionate part of his mind told him that she would never talk like this unless out of burning conviction. The words: "Get out," were in his mind but he did not utter them. Joyce's lips began to quiver and her body relaxed. Suddenly she seemed younger, more vulnerable. They stood facing each other for a long time before she moved away. She said in a muffled voice:

"I'm sorry, Sap. I'm sorry."

"Joyce—"

"I wish I hadn't said it, but—" she glanced at him sideways. "I can't help being glad that I did. I *am* glad. I wish—" she broke off, obviously at a loss for words. "Oh, how I wish I could help!"

Palfrey put out his hands, profoundly glad that he had not given vent to his temper. A little uncertainly, wonderingly, she turned and took his hands.

"Joyce—the truth, now."

"Haven't I—haven't I convinced you that I *am* telling you the truth?"

"You were angry a moment ago, but you're not now. Do I give you the impression that I've given up?"

"Yes," she said simply. "You do."

He gripped her hands, which were very cold.

"When did you first begin to think this?"

"You—you haven't really been yourself since the news came through."

"In what way?" he demanded.

"Don't make me hurt you any more," Joyce pleaded.

"You won't hurt me, now. How have I been different?"

"It's hard to say," Joyce told him unsteadily. "You took it all so calmly, going along with the situation rather than fighting it. You haven't seemed to care what's happened. Even in your report about the Canyon of All Seasons you admit you turned back—you didn't go far enough into the Canyon to see very much. I know the American authorities are going to raid it, but normally you would have wanted our men in the raid, or even to be there yourself. You didn't make any such stipulation."

Palfrey said heavily:

"You mean I've let myself be pushed around."

"Sap, I hate to say it but yes, that *is* what's happened Take this man Harmon—and his story about the young married couple, Clive and Deidre Thomas. You didn't arrange for a search for them—normally you would have run them to earth and had them here for questioning. It's the same with Harmon himself. You ac-

cepted his story on its face value, didn't you? You saw him being fired at and you and this funny little Sheriff Pike rescued him. But he wasn't *hurt*. The four fishermen were all murdered but Harmon escaped. He might have been allowed to escape, he might be a spy. He told you that Johnny Woll mentioned you but Johnny Woll is dead, so Harmon could have been lying. You didn't do anything to find out." When Palfrey didn't answer, she went on: "Sap, I hate myself for saying all these things, but they are true, aren't they?"

Palfrey squeezed and then released her hands.

"Yes," he admitted. "If we had an agent who behaved like that I'd fire him, I'd know he was past it. You realise what this means, don't you?"

"You're not past it. You're overtired, and you've not had a real rest for years. You've had this cold hanging about you, and this case has been a tremendous shock. Sap—"

She stopped abruptly, startled.

An idea had stabbed into Palfrey's mind and his expression underwent a remarkable change. Joyce waited, tense again. There was no sound except their breathing; everything was still as if the outside world had been cut off from them completely.

"Sap—what is it?"

"Shock," Palfrey echoed slowly. "Overtired. No real rest. Cold. Joyce, telephone Dr. Frobisher, tell him I'm coming up for a thorough medical check, blood test, X-rays, the lot."

"Sap! Are you ill?" Joyce's voice became shrill with alarm.

"I'm going to find out," Palfrey said. "Joyce, listen to me. The trees are dying because the sap has dried up in them. You've just shown me that all my

energy has been sapped. Joyce—forget the pun on S.A.P.," he added, smiling tautly. "Just imagine the possibility that I've been taking some kind of drug which would dull my mind. There are plenty of such drugs. They take away the energy, the initiative, and don't tell me I'm trying to make excuses for a natural deterioration." As she hurried towards the telephone, he added: "I don't care what Frobisher is doing, I want him to examine me."

Joyce pressed the numbers of the Medical Department.

"Dr. Frobisher, please . . ."

"And Joyce—trace Harmon. I want him here as soon as possible. Trace the Thomases—"

"I've already told Washington to do that."

"Bless you! And—"

"Dr. Frobisher?" Joyce said, "Dr. Palfrey needs . . . Yes, by you personally . . . The possibility that he has been taking drugs with side effects . . . Yes I'm sure that will be all right . . . In ten minutes, then, thank you, goodbye."

She rang off.

"And check Sheriff Pike."

"He's being checked."

"I *did* say that Rakowitz might have been murdered," Palfrey said ruefully.

"Yes, I know." Laughter brightened eyes which had been so very anxious. "Dr. Frobisher says he'd like Professor Nieto prssent at the examination."

Nieto was Z5's expert on drugs of all kinds.

"Fine," said Palfrey. "Go through the reports, see what are coming in from the experts, and remember we need above all to find a place where the trees haven't yet been affected."

"I'll remember," Joyce said eagerly.

"And Joyce," said Palfrey, very quietly and gravely, "I shall remember this as long as I live. Never let me get away with anything. Especially don't let me get big-headed."

"*You* won't get big-headed," Joyce scoffed. "If there was ever a risk of that it was today. Even the smallest big-head would have ordered me out."

Palfrey smiled and turned away; but he felt as if he had lived through a whirlwind.

As Palfrey went along to the Medical Department, messages were being received from all over the world, telling of more forests affected, of more nations made aware of the danger. Newspapers picked up the story, television and radio relayed it. No single report came in of blight-free areas, and there were no encouraging words from those experts working desperately but blindly in an effort to find what caused the drying up of the trees.

Frobisher was a dapper, immaculate man with regular features, restless dark brown eyes, and a Vandyck beard. Nieto was a balding man in his middle thirties with baby-like features and a soft, almost whispering voice.

Other doctors had been in attendance; analyses of blood, sweat, urine, skin and hair had been or were being made in the adjoining laboratory. Palfrey had been waiting for over three hours, and was growing more and more impatient. A small man in a white smock came in from the laboratory.

"Professor Nieto will soon be ready, sir."

Frobisher nodded. "I can tell you some of the findings, Sap."

"Then tell me."

"Your heart is sound—as good as I've ever known in a man of your age."

"That's nice to hear."

"Your blood pressure is normal."

"Thanks."

"Your lungs and bronchial tubes are all right, too—a very faint murmur in the left lung—but you had a cold last week, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"What did you take for it?"

"Some cold capsules you prescribed. I got them from a chemist in the hotel."

"Taken any other drugs lately?"

"Not consciously."

"Can you be so certain?"

"I'm positive," Palfrey asserted.

"No sleeping pills, anti-depressants, pain relievers of any kind?"

"Nothing."

"It could be important. If—"

The door opened again and Nieto came in carrying a tray on which were the various specimens which the doctors had taken. He put this on a small table, and went to the handbasin and washed his hands. Palfrey felt a stirring of annoyance at this deliberation, and at the same time a twinge of alarm. Frobisher, who knew the Spaniard well, made no attempt to hurry him. At last Nieto turned round.

"Your symptoms," he said in his precise English. "You have not been as alert as usual. No."

"I have not."

"Many things have been an effort."

"Yes," said Palfrey and now he was anxious as well as alarmed.

"You have been inclined to tolerate situations which at one time would have troubled you."

Palfrey said: "What's the cause of all this, Professor?"

"There is no doubt of the cause. You have been taking an excessive dosage of anti-histamine drug."

Palfrey said heavily: "If I have, I haven't known it."

"It is, of course, often used as a sedative."

"I haven't taken sedatives, only coid capsules."

"You have them with you?"

Palfrey took a small phial out of his pocket.

"We will have these analysed," said Nieto. "It is only a matter of a few moments." He took them and went out, returning almost at once. "What else could the anti-histamine have been in?"

Palfrey said: "Sugar, possibly. Or salt. Or—"

"No other tablets?"

"No."

"Cigarettes?"

"Not for some days—I don't smoke when I've a cold."

"Very wise. And there is nothing else?"

"As I've told Dr. Frobisher, I can think of nothing at all."

Nieto said: "So. These capsules, Dr. Palfrey. Where did you buy them?"

"In the chemist's shop in the hotel," Palfrey repeated.

"The hotel above here?"

"Yes."

"We will send for a supply," said Nieto, "and examine those also. Meanwhile—" he broke off as the assistant came in again with the capsules, and a slip of paper. Nieto took this, gave it one glance, and said: "As I thought, Dr. Palfrey, one of these capsules taken three or four times a day would produce

the symptoms from which you have been suffering. Once you stop taking them you will be yourself again. They will not harm you, you understand, except to drain away your energy."

"No doubt this is deliberate," Frobisher put in keenly. "It shouldn't take long to interview the one who sold them to you."

CHAPTER 12

The Recovery of Dr. Palfrey

Palfrey looked hard into Frobisher's face. "How long does the effect of these capsules last?"

"Only a few hours."

"So as I had my last cold capsule at lunch time, I should soon be myself."

"How many have you been taking?"

"Three or so a day," answered Palfrey with a short laugh. "Just enough to keep me under! No," he replied to Frobisher's question, "it won't take long to interview the woman who sold me these. She may not know much, but we'll see." He reached out for a telephone and pressed his own number. "Joyce," he said. "I'm not at death's door, and with luck I might begin to be quite bright in the morning. Send someone up to Dills, the chemist, and have them buy me some *Coldkill* capsules . . . Make sure it's someone who won't be recognised . . . And do you remember the grey-haired woman with the thick-lensed glasses at Dills? . . . That's right, a Pole or a Czech . . . she always sold me the capsules . . . Have someone trail her for the next twenty-four hours, but don't let her know she's being followed. Got all that?"

"What have they given you? De-pep pills?" demanded Joyce.

Palfrey laughed; and it was the first time he had felt like laughing since he had heard of the blight. He rang off and turned to Nieto.

"I'll send the capsules bought by someone not known to the woman pharmacist, for you to analyse. Send me a report at once, will you?"

"Of course, without delay."

"Thanks," said Palfrey. "And thanks, Dick."

"Any idea what this tree business is about?" inquired Frobisher.

"Not yet," said Palfrey, and repeated very thoughtfully: "No, not yet."

He went out briskly, feeling much more himself than he had done for a week. He walked towards the research laboratory which was on the same floor and went in. Along one wall was a bench with all the usual laboratory equipment, along shelves were tubes and small bottles of acids, on the wall opposite were small ovens which could heat to temperatures of over 2000 degrees Centigrade. Through a doorway which was locked and barred was a small radioactive and nuclear experimental reactor, used largely for testing substances which caused strong reactions to geiger counters.

In one corner was a small pile of brittle logs; in glass containers, the wood dust. Poring over some charred ashes which had just come out of one of the ovens was Hezekiah Smith, a very tall, very lean, very colourless man; even his hair and his wispy moutache were indefinite.

He glanced round.

"What does the damage?" asked Palfrey in his new and brighter mood.

"Bacteria-activated sap," said Hezekiah cautiously.

Palfrey said, suddenly sharp and alert:

"Are you serious?"

"Goodness me," said Hezekiah in mild reproach, "Do you think this is a joking matter?"

Palfrey gripped his arm.

"Bacteria-activated *sap?*"

"Yes, Sap. I—oh! I beg your pardon!" Hezekiah smiled thinly. "Yes indeed. I don't know how it is introduced into the forests—through the soil, I should imagine. The sap of pine and fir trees is affected almost instantaneously; so are all the coniferous trees so far tested. The deciduous trees take a little longer."

"How did you find it out?"

"We brought in seedlings of various kinds and injected them with various bacteria first discovered when we were looking for something to destroy aphis. I understand that there are similar experiments elsewhere."

"Can you test the soil theory?"

"Come and see," said Hezekiah. He led the way to a false window beyond which were boxes and boxes of seedling trees which grew little more than ankle high. "They are—or they were—all healthy. We have put the radio-active dust into the soil. In an hour we shall know what the result is."

Palfrey asked: "Where did you find healthy trees?"

"Most of the big plantations have seedlings grown under artificial light and glass. Your friend Rakowitz wasn't the only man who wanted trees to grow more quickly, you know. It is a familiar branch of research."

"Do you know what else is in the dust?"

Hezekiah Smith actually twitched his nose.

"No, Dr. Palfrey, not precisely. There are the traces of this bacteria, which is most infectious, and there is little doubt that the blight—I prefer to call it the rotting process—is connected with it. However, there is no indication that the dust contaminates other growing things. Ordinary plant life—cabbages, peas, beans, root crops, cereals, don't appear to be affected."

"Thank God for that!"

"Indeed yes. These plants are largely water, of

course, and the sap—I *do* beg your pardon—of all trees is largely water but also to some degree resinous. All have a greater or lesser proportion of resin, and this is the substance which is affected so quickly by the bacteria. You have doubtless observed that properly dried and seasoned wood is not affected at all. It is the living organism of the sap of the trees which is so vulnerable. Would you care to see what is happening in the seedlings which have been in the dust-impregnated soil for an hour?"

"Very much," said Palfrey.

Hezekiah opened a narrow door and stepped into the garden. He picked up a box marked *1st*. The tiny seedlings of Douglas fir looked green and healthy, all of equal height and spread. Silently, the scientist held the box out to Palfrey, who hesitated before he took a branch between his fingers and exerted a little pressure.

The branch snapped into two.

"Now there is no doubt at all that the blight spreads upwards from the soil," Hezekiah said. "And it traverses the soil which quickly becomes impregnated."

"And no doubt that it has to be introduced artificially into the soil all over the world," said Palfrey. He wondered if Hezekiah Smith understood the significance of that, but the other, absorbed by a narrower vision, was breaking the slender stem of another seedling. Palfrey left him, knowing the reports would come at regular intervals. He returned to his own office and opened the door—and stood stock still.

Sitting in a chair opposite the door, long legs stretched out, enormous body overlapping on either side, was his oldest and his closest friend—Stefan Andromovitch, second-in-command of Z5.

Stefan rose slowly to his full six feet seven, as Palfrey recovered from the surprise and strode forward.

They shook hands without a word, then Palfrey stood back to study the Russian. Every time he saw Stefan he was surprised anew by his size. There was something else which Palfrey had seen and recognised when they had first met, over twenty years before. In the serenity of this man's expression there was a saintliness which, to some, had an unnerving quality. His grey eyes held a transparent honesty, a promise of an integrity rare even in good men.

In the worst days of the cold war, Stefan Andromovitch had worked with Palfrey as an agent of Z5. Gradually the prejudice against him because he was a Russian from Moscow had died away. Now, few people thought of his nationality.

Palfrey said: "How bad is the blight in Russia?"

"Very bad indeed," Andromovitch said, simply.

"I was afraid it might be."

"And worse for us in one way," said Andromovitch, "we do not manufacture the wood substitute in great quantities yet, and we rely more than you on fruit for our food."

Palfrey said: "Sakolov was badly worried."

"We all are," said Stefan, leaning back and narrowing his eyes. "And you—it hardly needs a glance to see how it's affecting you. As I flew across the North Sea, Sap, I made a promise to myself."

"What was it?"

"One day I shall come to England simply for the pleasure of seeing you!"

"Not in emergency, you mean," Palfrey said. "It's a happy thought. What brought you this time?"

"I knew you would tell me the truth."

"There's nothing really different or really new," Palfrey told him. "I only wish there were. The dust carries the blight—so does the soil."

"Is it radio-active or bacteriological?"

"Bacteriological," answered Palfrey. "Stefan—"

"Yes?"

"Have you been feeling all right lately?"

"I had a cold, that is all. Why?"

Palfrey told him . . .

And while telling he remembered the dangers he had shared with this man, the courage Stefan Andromovitch possessed, the fact that they had been on the point of disaster together a dozen times. There was something reassuring in the way Stefan smiled when the story was told, and the way he said:

"I don't think I have been any more dull-witted than usual, Sap. But at least we have this woman in the chemist's shop upstairs. She could lead us to others. Tell me more about her—and about Harmon—and about the young married couple, the Thomases . . ."

Freda Piluski had been naturalised for fifteen years, being one of the many Poles who had elected to come to England instead of staying in a communist homeland. Now, her day's work done (she worked from eight o'clock in the morning until five o'clock in the afternoon), she walked from the narrow approach to the New Forum Hotel, in Mayfair, to Piccadilly. She stood on one side of the wide thoroughfare looking at the crowds in Green Park, seeing half-a-dozen trees topple as young people leaned against them. The phenomenon was still strange enough to be intriguing; the ugly consequences of a famine in wood meaning little to the man in the street. Even supplies of fruit were as yet unaffected and no decision about rationing had so far been made.

Freda Piluski did not know that she was being followed.

A small, unobtrusive young man, Palfrey's agent, sauntered after her and waited in the queue at the bus

stop for buses heading towards north London. Freda had a one-room flatlet in Bloomsbury. She got inside the bus and Palfrey's man went on top, taking a seat from where he could see everyone who boarded or left the bus.

The woman got off in Theobald's Road, near Lincoln's Inn Fields. In the Fields, so beautifully kept, two trees had fallen, leaving the usual pile of pieces and heap of dust. She turned down John Street, Palfrey's man following only fifty yards behind. Her flat was in a side road, and she turned that corner without looking round. She had short, sturdy legs and was very broad across the beam and across the shoulders.

She entered her house and plodded up the uncarpeted stairs.

Palfrey's man crossed the street to keep the house under observation. He was actually on the opposite pavement when he heard an explosion—at the same time, the glass of one of the windows blew out. An elderly man, passing, gasped in pain as splinters struck him in the arm and the cheek; a cyclist snatched his hand from the handle-bars as flying glass caught him. The machine wobbled and fell.

Palfrey's man rushed into the house and up the stairs to the first landing.

There was a heap of rubble, a smell of burning, while flames licked at the hair and the face of the woman he had followed; and there was a gaping hole in her head.

"The door must have had a bobby trap over it," the Z5 agent said.

"No doubt. What did you do?" asked Palfrey.

"Left the matter to the police and the fire service—if the police get any information, they'll pass it on here."

"Did you see anyone in the house?"

"No."

"No one appear from the street?"

"No. It seemed a bit odd, but a lot of people get home later than six and it is one of those flatlet houses without a resident caretaker. Want me to go back?"

"No," said Palfrey. "You're quite right, it's a job for the police." He dismissed the man and went to rejoin Stefan Andromovitch in the office, deeply preoccupied by the new turn of events and this proof of the closeness with which he and Z5 were being watched.

"Sap," Stefan said briskly, "they knew you'd discovered the capsules were drugged, and undoubtedly realised the woman was followed. They are a step ahead of us all the time."

Palfrey said grimly: "Don't rub it in. What baffles me is—" he broke off. "*Every*thing baffles me!"

"What can they want—is surely the key question."

"If it's absolute destruction—" Palfrey paused again. "Does that make any sense at all? Would anyone go to this fantastic trouble just to destroy?" He went on, mumbling to himself: "Have to be a pretty big hate, if it is. Who would hate to such a degree?"

Stefan said: "It could be destruction for the sake of destruction; just vandalism on a mammoth scale."

"It's a hideous thought, but—" Palfrey began to coil a few strands of hair about his forefinger. "What good can such destruction do? What does anyone gain by killing off the trees?" He tugged at the hair and then patted it down with an almost angry gesture. "If it's an experiment which has got out of hand, why do they have agents in so many places? There must *be* some purpose in it. By killing Freda Piluski they have made it clear they're not only well-equipped but they have a brilliant intelligence system. Utter ruthlessness and high efficiency is a powerful combination. If

we'd heard a word from them it would be bearable, even if they started uttering threats I would rejoice, but this—" he began to pace up and down. "No one benefits as far as I can see. No one can possibly benefit, unless—"

Stefan was looking at him very intently.

"Unless," Palfrey went on softly, in a moment of near-inspiration, "someone now knows *how* to grow trees fast and is sure the great forests can be re-built. That would enable them to get a monopoly of wood, wouldn't it? And with a monopoly of wood and trees they would go a long way towards owning the earth —*wouldn't they?*" he repeated in a whisper so low that even Stefan hardly heard it.

CHAPTER 13

The Monopolists

"So we have a different quest," Stefan said.

"That's about it," Palfrey agreed. "We need to look for anyone who will benefit from healthy trees, since no one can from the dead ones." He was moving about the room again, with a return of the old familiar energy. "We're looking for monopolists. We're looking for someone who knows all about the tree and timber business or has a large financial stake in it. We could be looking for a country, a company, a group of companies or an individual. And whoever it is *has* representatives everywhere—people who wouldn't seem out of place in the great forests."

"Well," Stefan said.

"Tourists," Palfrey answered himself. "Campers, fishermen, hikers, botanists, holiday-makers. A nice choice. Stefan—will you go to the Canyon of All Seasons and see what you can discover there?"

"Yes."

"The American authorities are going to move into the Canyon very soon. I haven't yet heard whether they've actually started. It's almost impossible from the ground, the entrance to the Canyon is so narrow that if anyone wants to defend it, a few small guns, a few grenades and a flame thrower or so would be enough. It can be attacked from the air by paratroopers, but according to Sheriff Pike, it is possible for people who have known the Canyon all their lives to get lost

there—hundreds of smaller canyons lead off, there are hundreds of caves and every climatic condition known to man. Go and find out exactly what's happening."

"What of the man Harmon and these Thomases?"

"Our Washington people are looking for them," Palfrey answered. He gave a bark of a laugh. "Stefan, it could be very unhealthy in All Seasons Canyon!"

"I have been in unhealthy places before," Stefan retorted drily. "I will tell our Washington headquarters to expect me in twelve hours. Is there anything I can do before I leave?"

"Inform our North and East European regional offices of our change of direction," Palfrey said.

"Will you tell the others?"

"Yes, as soon as I can."

They gripped hands before Stefan went out, ducking beneath the lintel of the door. It closed behind him silently. Palfrey stood by his desk, in a moment of deep reflection. This was the measure of their friendship; an occasional emergency meeting, when they picked up the old threads as if they themselves had been apart for a day or two, parting again with one or both of them going into a danger from which he might never return.

This *could* be the last time he would see Stefan Andromovitch.

"I'm being morbid," he told himself in annoyance. He rounded the desk and sat down, but as he picked up a pencil to make notes for instructions to be sent to regions, he had a momentary glimpse of All Seasons Canyon, the rustling waterfall, the trees scythed down by the wind, the waving arms of George Harmon.

He telephoned Joyce, told her to make an appointment for him with Lord Wolhampton, and then at last began to write.

George Harmon was still in Christmas Valley. A few of the inhabitants had gone back, and a small army of land and air force personnel had descended on Christmas Village. All the tourist cabins and the tents, the motel and the big lodge, had been taken over. Enormous supply dumps were growing higher and higher. Landing strips for small bombers and fighter aircraft were being made, the uprooting of the trees proving no difficulty at all. A squadron of helicopters was all ready at work on reconnaissance missions over the Canyon of All Seasons. Army veterans who had served in Korea and in Vietnam were surveying the canyon for landing places. There were few signs of life. Hundreds of photographs were taken, printed and placed round the walls of the Administration Building.

Christmas Village was like an armed camp behind the front lines.

Sheriff Pike continued his daily rounds, unperturbed. Except when he was consulted about village affairs, the army ignored him, as they ignored Harmon. The Park and Forest Rangers were working with advance patrols of armoured divisions which went through the matchwood forests, the dried wood cracking and powdering.

Sitting in his office with Harmon and Tom Blessing, Sheriff Pike spoke.

"You would think there were a hundred thousand men in that canyon, wouldn't you, not a few hundred. If you ask me, they're using a pile-driver to crush a nut."

"Maybe!" said Harmon. "I've seen termites act on dry wood the way this blight affects the trees. I—"

He broke off as the door opened. The biggest man any of them had seen in their lives stooped beneath

the door and came in. There was a momentary glimpse of alarm in the eyes of all three, until the giant smiled and all sense of alarm faded.

An hour later, Stefan Andromovitch said quietly: "What I want to do, Sheriff Pike, is to get into that canyon with two or three men who know the terrain. That is the best way to reconnoitre. Will you come with me yourself?"

"You trust me that far?" remarked the sheriff.

"I trust you until you prove you cannot be trusted."

Pike took a cigar out of a plastic wrap and stuck it into the corner of his mouth.

"Sure, I'll come."

"Mr. Harmon?"

"I know the forest but not the canyon."

"Will you come?"

"Yes."

"Don't ask Tom Blessing," pleaded the sheriff. "Someone has to take care of the army. I know one other man who will come if you want him. Luke Shaw, who owns the camping and fishing equipment store. He's not exactly busy. Will you take him on my word?"

"Certainly," Stefan said. . "He will know what provisions we need, what arms—" he broke off. "You will organise everything, sheriff?"

"Yes. But there could be a problem," Pike mused.

"In what particular way?"

"I have been grounded. No one can leave the village area without permission from the colonel in charge."

"I will see him," Stefan said. "You make the preparations." He stood up from a rocking chair which had been made for a giant, and went on: "Is there any news of the Thomases?"

"No," answered Sheriff Pike. "Every State has been

looking for them but there's no trace anywhere. Police are watching their home and other places they might go. When there's news, we'll hear."

In fact the Thomases were in the Canyon of All Seasons.

Palfrey opened a drawer in his desk, and from a concealed section took out what looked like a small toupee —not much more than a few locks which matched his hair exactly. He laid this on the palm of his hand for a moment as if with vanity. Then he dampened the underside and worked the toupee into his own hair and combed it until it looked quite natural.

In that hair were tiny cylinders of a powerful explosive. He knew of no better hiding place for it.

He went along to the lift and up to another serving the New Forum Hotel. There were lift shafts which stopped at disguised doors between the normal Hotel floors, so that anyone from Z5 who appeared in the lobby seemed to have come from the hotel bedrooms. Each secret door was fitted with an electric device to warn agents if anyone was within earshot, and a system of mirrors added to the security. In a dozen places, these exits were only known to members of Z5. But now Palfrey wondered who was aware of the fact that he was so often in the hotel. Whoever had bribed or persuaded Freda Piluski to sell him doctored capsules, must have known that he went there regularly. In fact he had a penthouse apartment—which he seldom used—from which there was a nonstop lift down to his headquarters. Was it possible that anyone was aware of this?

A young man with big horn-rimmed glasses came from the dispensary when he appeared.

"Good morning, sir."

"Good morning. A packet of *Coldkill* capsules, please."

"The large size or the small?"

"The large."

"That will be six shillings and fourpence, sir."

"Thanks," said Palfrey. "Where is the lady assistant who usually serves me?"

"I don't know, sir," the young man said. "I was sent from another branch to take over."

"Oh, really? Where were you before?" asked Palfrey interestedly.

"At the London Hilton Hotel, sir."

Palfrey nodded pleasantly and stepped out into a bright morning. Workmen were erecting a wire fence about a plane tree which grew nearby, and against other trees not yet fenced, was a big painted sign: DO NOT TOUCH. He reached Piccadilly and across the road, in Green Park, he saw that a small army of workmen were erecting fences round whole groups of trees, and cordoning others off. DO NOT TOUCH notices had sprung up everywhere.

A middle-aged woman, watching his expression, said: "Awful thing, isn't it?"

"Awful," Palfrey agreed.

"It's very frightening, really."

"Yes—very."

"It's something in the air, they say."

"So I've heard."

"And what it's doing to the price of fruit already—it's wicked."

"Oh? What are they doing?"

"They've put threepence a pound on nearly everything. And they *say* there won't be any crop this year."

Or the next, or the next, or the next, Palfrey thought bleakly—unless by some miracle the life could

be restored as quickly as it had been taken away. That didn't seem likely. He saw a taxi waiting; one was always nearby for him, driven by a Z5 agent. He hailed it as if it were an ordinary taxi plying for hire.

"Where to this morning, sir?" asked the Jewish driver.

"Wolhampton House."

"I ought to have known," the driver said.

Wolhampton House, built in Bayswater near Hyde Park, was one of the biggest of the modern buildings in London—and it had been one of the first. By no means a sky-scraper, it was tall, and very strong, built of ferro-concrete, steel and glass. It was the world headquarters of the Wolhampton Pulp and Paper Corporation, an international group which had several times been under scrutiny by the Monopolies Commission. It was, in fact, an enormous combine of dozens of different companies, each of them independent except in selling and distributing, and no charge of monopoly had ever been made to stick. The chairman of the board had selected the title, Lord Wolhampton of Wolhampton, in Surrey, when he had been made a baron in the first honours list after the Second World War.

Palfrey had met him socially once or twice.

A well-dressed young man was waiting in the spacious modern entrance hall, where three well-dressed and attractive women sat at three reception desks, made of some unusual, polished wood. Behind these were carved wooden murals, quite remarkable in themselves, for they depicted forests of dozens of different kinds of trees. There was nothing here or anywhere else to suggest alarm or panic, or even concern.

The lift shafts were of wood.

The lift stopped at the fifth floor and Palfrey stepped out into another beautifully panelled hall,

this time with only one receptionist. She looked up with a pleasant smile.

"Good morning, Dr. Palfrey."

So he was recognised on sight.

"Good morning."

"Lord Wolhampton is looking forward to meeting you."

"Thank you."

"This way, sir," said the young man. He led Palfrey along a wide passage; and on every wall were veneers of polished wood, each with a small brass plate in the corner, showing where it came from. Palfrey read: Mozambique; Ceylon; Mato Grosso, Argentina; the Urals—before his escort stopped at a doorway which opened at a touch.

"This way, sir."

Palfrey followed him through three ante-rooms, then into a spacious, beautifully proportioned room with long windows overlooking the park. Standing by the window was Wolhampton, a short, very broad man with iron grey hair. He had a low forehead and flat features, which gave him a slightly simian look. Beyond him, sitting in a swivel-chair was a woman of perhaps thirty-five, beautifully groomed and dressed, long shapely legs drawn up, her skirt just long enough to touch her knees.

"Dr. Palfrey," the young man announced.

"Dr. Palfrey, I am very glad to see you again," Lord Wolhampton moved forward and shook hands; he had a very powerful grip. "We met at a reception to the Cambodian Ambassador three years ago, I believe. And of course I saw you at the conference." Either he had a phenomenal memory or he had been well briefed. "Make sure we're not disturbed, Jones." That young exquisite a Jones? He made a silent way out as the woman rose. She was not a beauty, for her features

were too coarse, but she had fine, honey-brown eyes. "Dr. Palfrey, I should like you to meet my sister, Lady Stanhope, who is on our board."

"Lady Stanhope."

"Dr. Palfrey."

Lord Wolhampton pulled a chair up to the highly polished desk.

"I can't pretend that I was surprised to hear you were coming," he said; he had a pleasant if rather ironic smile.

"I can imagine how troubled you are about this situation, and that you feel that with our resources we might be able to help."

Palfrey gave his rather vacant smile, a smile which deceived many people into thinking he lacked character. "I on the other hand, admit surprise that you are taking the situation so calmly, sir."

"Would any purpose be served by an appearance of agitation?" asked Wolhampton.

Palfrey's smile became even more vacuous.

"Indeed no. Though some of us don't have sufficient self-control to conceal agitation, if we are a prey to it. And those who do usually give it away somehow or other."

"And I don't?"

"Neither you nor Lady Stanhope seem the slightest degree troubled," remarked Palfrey, sounding very diffident. "And your lives and presumably your fortunes are dependent on wood and trees. I envy you your assurance, sir. May I ask what causes it?"

CHAPTER 14

New Life

Lord Wolhampton moved to a chair behind his desk and sat down. His sister watched Palfrey steadily. Palfrey had a strong feeling they were amused by his manner and not at all impressed. He noticed the way Lord Wolhampton's lips turned down at the corners and the glint of suppressed amusement in Lady Stanhope's eyes.

"You are quite right," Wolhampton said. "We are not troubled."

"Isn't that a little odd, sir?"

"We don't think so. Indeed, we think the conditions prevailing may prove to be of very great advantage."

"To you, sir?"

Wolhampton said: "Forgive me if I sound sententious. To mankind."

Palfrey looked at him steadily, thinking: he means it. He began to coil strands of hair about his forefinger.

"The man in the street doesn't exactly see it as a boon, you know."

"The man in the street seldom knows what is good for him."

"Oh," said Palfrey, mildly. "And you do?"

"I do. You do."

"I see," said Palfrey, tugging at the strands of hair. "A superior class?"

"Don't *you* see yourself as superior?"

Palfrey considered.

"In some ways to some people, yes. Not in the general sense you seem to be talking about."

Wolhampton's smile deepened.

"You know, Palfrey, you're not being honest with yourself or with me. You know perfectly well you are a superior human being, endowed by nature with an intellect very far above the average. There are, perhaps, a hundred people of your calibre in the world. Instead of being mock-modest you should be very proud of yourself."

Palfrey uncoiled the strand of hair and flattened it on his forehead.

"I don't feel proud," he said. "Not your kind of pride."

"You should," said Wolhampton. "*I* am a very proud man."

Palfrey's smile made him look positively child-like; innocent and cherubic.

"That's a common feeling among megalomaniacs, I'm told," he remarked quietly.

"If that's a joke, it doesn't amuse me, and if it isn't, I'm not angered by it," Wolhampton said blandly. "I know exactly what I am doing and why I am doing it and I know how to carry it out. I would rather have you on my side than against me, but—" he shrugged. "It won't seriously affect the issue if you're against me."

"Are you really so sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. You are quite powerless, both as an individual or as the leader of your organisation. Do you know, Palfrey, you are falling into the oldest error known to man. You are assuming that methods used in the past will carry you to success today and tomorrow. They will not. In the past you have been

preoccupied in fighting against men—megalomaniacs if you like—who wish to destroy the world. I wish to rebuild it."

"First destruction, then construction? Is that what you mean?" As he spoke, Palfrey was aware that Wolhampton and his sister had made no attempt at all to deny their involvement in what was going on; they were behaving as if they believed he knew that they were responsible. The most alarming fact was their nonchalance, indicating so clearly their absolute confidence. There wasn't the slightest sign of aggressiveness or braggadocio. They took the situation with an almost exasperating unconcern.

"First destruction, yes," said Wolhampton. "To a limited degree."

"The forests of the world are dead,"

"They can be grown again."

"It will take fifty years."

Lady Stanhope moved very slightly. "You really should be sure of your facts, before making such a sweeping assertion, Dr. Palfrey."

Palfrey said: "So you can put life back into them?" He smiled, quite brightly. "I had wondered."

Wolhampton said quietly: "Yes, we can do that."

"Just you?"

"Yes," said Wolhampton, "just I and my associates."

"Are you *quite* sure?"

"There is no doubt at all."

"I don't really believe it," Palfrey remarked musingly.

"Will you believe the evidence of your own eyes?"

"If it's in front of my eyes all the time, yes."

Wolhampton said: "When I am ready, it will be. Palfrey, I waited for you to come to me, being quite sure that sooner or later you would do so. I have given

you a world-wide demonstration of the effectiveness of what you call 'the blight'. I give you credit for realising that without forests the economy, the *life* of the world cannot go on. A land without trees becomes a desert—and as the rains come and wash away the topsoil, the desert becomes barren. *Do* you realise that?"

"Perfectly," Palfrey said.

"And you have had reports from every part of the world?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what causes the drying-up of the trees?"

"Some form of bacteriological infection."

"What form?"

"I don't know yet," Palfrey said and gave his mild smile. "There are some very clever research workers in forestry, you know. You don't have all the bright ones."

"You or others might find the cause of the ageing. It would take time, but you might do it. I don't think you or any of your clever friends will find the cure. Do you really think you can?"

"Given time, yes, I do."

"You haven't enough time," retorted Wolhampton.

"Leslie," Lady Stanhope said, "shouldn't you tell Dr. Palfrey what you want of him?"

"I am about to, Hilda." The man squared his shoulders. "Palfrey, without trees, wood and the by-products of wood the world will soon begin to rot. It is not difficult to infect other foods, the staple diet of people and of animals. We haven't yet done so because we have no desire to make the ordinary man in the street suffer. He may not be very clever, but up to a point, he *is* sensitive. He does feel pain, and he loves life. There is no reason why he shouldn't live in peace

—if enough of the hundred or so superior beings behave sensibly."

The man paused and studied Palfrey, while Lady Stanhope's gaze continued unwaveringly. It was almost as if they were trying to read his thoughts, so as to judge his true reaction. He hoped that nothing in his expression betrayed the heaviness in his heart, the feeling almost of despair. It was all the worse because he had not come prepared even remotely for what this man was saying, had not dreamed of such a confrontation. He had come, in fact, for help!

"Don't *you* believe man should live in peace, Palfrey?"

"Certainly."

"Do you know what the American authorities are preparing in Christmas Valley?"

"An armed intervention."

"Very aptly described. Your *first* task will be to have the American forces withdrawn," Wolhampton said. "They have to learn—and, sadly, I think you also have to learn—that violence begets violence."

"And must be stopped," interpolated Lady Stanhope.

Palfrey said: "I think I know what you mean. Violence begets violence, destruction begets destruction. You destroy the trees so someone else comes along and destroys you. They can, you know. I—ah—hate to say it, but if I'm not back at my office by a certain specified time there will be a search for me—here."

"There will be no attempt to hold you," said Wolhampton.

"There will be no attempt to hold *you*."

Wolhampton laughed. "We cannot be caught unless we wish to be, yet if such a thing *should* happen, the secret of giving new life to the trees will go with us. Palfrey—"

"Surely *you* are a civilised man," Lady Stanhope suggested. "You won't use force if reason can get the results you want."

"I've no love at all for force," Palfrey assured her. "I prefer it to submitting to blackmail, though. However," he smiled again, quite brightly, "what if I call the army off All Seasons Canyon?"

"Can you?"

"Possibly, yes—if I give a sufficiently good reason."

"Without that reason?"

"No."

"Isn't it a good enough inducement to say that if the forces aren't withdrawn, there will be no hope for the trees and the fruits of the trees?" asked Wolhampton. "Palfrey, listen to me. We have used the trees for several reasons. The world's economy will dry up without wood, but it will be a long, slow process. We offer no short-term ultimatum. People love trees, too—there is nearly as much sentiment attached to them as there is to animals. And trees make a remarkable object lesson. If one can arrange for a tree to be pushed over at the touch of a finger, that really *is* strength. It is a demonstration of great power without actual intimidation or immediate menace. You and the leaders of the world know what we can do, and they can kill us, without saving themselves—or they can listen to us, and do what we say and have nothing more to fear."

"Except you and your friends," Palfrey said drily.

"There is nothing to fear from us."

"To accept your orders, and submit to your domination, is reason enough to fear."

"Does submission really matter, Palfrey? Freedom in the sense you are implying is an illusion. You must know that. The freedom that matters is to be able to

live in freedom from fear of war, freedom from hunger, freedom from religious persecution." Wolhampton's voice grew stronger, touched almost with passion. "Personal freedom in daily life, freedom to live as one wants to—these are the significant freedoms. You've seen enough of life in the democracies to know that they are filled with corruption, poverty, disease, dishonesty. Look at England today—a hotbed of crime both violent and petty, of rape and sexual perversion, overcrowded prisons and overcrowded hospitals, incivility from nearly everyone, insolence and disobedience to the law, strikes and other insidious forms of blackmail—aren't *you* aware of these things?"

Palfrey murmured: "Sadly. Yes. Far too often."

"I want to stop them!" cried Wolhampton.

"There must be quite a number of others who would like to do the same thing," replied Palfrey mildly.

"There is a significant difference," Wolhampton said, "*I* can."

"By the threat of starvation, though."

"I can make this society, this civilisation, a thing of great pride and a glowing tribute to humanity."

"A nice thought," Palfrey said. "Presumably you've drawn up a code of behaviour?"

"Of course."

"And those who don't accept it.?"

"They *will* accept it."

"Or what?"

"They will have no alternative," Wolhampton stated. For the first time he began to show signs of exasperation. His sister was tapping her foot against the floor as if she, too, were out of patience.

Palfrey said: "Is it all right if I leave now?"

"You will leave when I want you to!" Wolhampton barked. "There is no way out of this room unless you know the controls. Don't be an obstinate fool!"

"I'm afraid the truth is that he is obstinate," Lady Stanhope said, in a tone of finality. "He's no use to us, we're wasting our time."

Wolhampton said: "Palfrey, you still have an opportunity of going back to your government and the conference delegates, and telling them that on my terms life will be put back into the trees. They will be humanitarian terms. They will include the out-lawing of war and the destruction of all weapons of war including modern nuclear weapons. I have a manifesto drawn up and you may have an hour to study it."

Palfrey wanted to say: "I don't need two minutes to reject it."

He said, carefully: "I haven't seen the new life put into the trees, you know."

"Dr. Palfrey," said Lady Stanhope, standing up and crossing towards him, her expression bland and unrevealing, "will you seriously consider doing what my brother asks?"

Palfrey forced himself to say: "If the trees revive, perhaps—provided the manifesto makes sense."

He was acutely aware of her scrutiny, and he remarked to himself how like her brother she was. She stared for a long time, and then turned away. Lord Wolhampton looked at her uneasily, then turned to Palfrey.

"Come with me."

Palfrey saw him touch the corner of the desk. When they reached a door on one side of the room it opened, and a manservant stood there, expressionless, blank. They were in a small passage, one wall of which was of opaque glass. Wolhampton unlocked a further

door and they went through into a courtyard surrounded on all sides by the ferro-concrete and the glass. The whole place appeared to be deserted.

Palfrey stood still, astounded.

In the middle of the courtyard, which was at least fifty yards by fifty, was a model of a canyon—a rocky canyon with deep fissures, with streams and rivers, with a lake and a cascading waterfall. He had no doubt at all; this was a model of the Canyon of All Seasons. In the valleys which led off the main canyon were miniature trees, saplings much smaller than those which Hezekiah had shown him. They grew in mass formation like the trees of the real canyon, tens upon tens of thousands of them.

Paths, with just room for one person to walk at a time, wound about the canyon in all directions.

Wolhampton said quietly: "Select any terrace of trees you wish, Palfrey, and handle as many as you wish."

Palfrey hesitated, then moved nearly halfway along a main path bordered by Douglas firs, selected one and bent it; it snapped in two. He flicked the branches of two other trees with his forefinger and they broke off, scattering dust and fragments. He ran the back of his hand along the miniature trees and they fell in all directions, cutting a swathe very like the swathes he had seen in the real Canyon of All Seasons.

He drew back.

"These are mature dwarf trees," Wolhampton told him, "and they are affected by the blight in exactly the same way as trees of normal size—they are normal, except that these grow much more quickly. We *can* hasten the growth of trees to a remarkable degree." He handed Palfrey a small phial of powder. "Sprinkle that over the area you have selected," he said.

"Then you may stay here until you see the result."

Wolhampton turned and walked away.

Palfrey did as he had been told, watching the fine powder settle. He stood, silent and alone, in the very heart of London, hearing no sound at all. He stared at the damage he had done, and then he moved up to the top of the canyon and walked around the rim, slowly trying to think, remembering everything that Wolhampton had said.

The minutes dragged.

He wondered what the others would do if he refused to agree to their demands. He reminded himself of the dozens, the *hundreds* of times, he had heard men who saw themselves as benevolent dictators draw their pictures of the world as they considered it should be . . . and always under their own control.

At last, he moved towards the Douglas firs. He hesitated for a long time, then moved suddenly, brushing the back of his hand over the trees.

They swayed and they bent but they did not break.

The trees he had broken before were no longer brittle.

The trees which had been dead were alive again.

CHAPTER 15

The Re-birth

Palfrey took the branch of another tree between his fingers and tried to snap it; it bent double but did not break. He pulled another out by the roots and tried to break it with his two hands, but without the slightest effect.

These *were* the trees which had been brittle only an hour before.

He took one which had three branches broken by his earlier furious sweep and bent that to and fro; it did break but only after great effort, and there was dampness at the broken ends. This actual fir *had* been dried and powdery when he had broken it.

And it *was* alive again.

It was like seeing the rebirth of nature. He felt a tremendous surge of hope, almost of exhilaration—and then suddenly his spirits dropped as he remembered Wolhampton, and all the man had said. He looked at the windows which were like square, sightless eyes. Nothing stirred. He saw no one, but could not be sure that he was unwatched.

Slowly he turned towards the door through which he had come. It opened, and Wolhampton and his sister appeared, walking towards him, both smiling in their ironic, rather superior, way. As they drew nearer he thought again how absolutely sure of themselves they looked; as if nothing could ever shake their confidence.

Wolhampton carried a black folder in his right hand.

"Well?" he asked. "Are you satisfied that we can put life back into the trees?"

"Yes," Palfrey said simply.

"We can do it with big trees as well as small," Wolhampton assured him. "Those which have been uprooted are dead for ever, but those which still stand will be normal trees within forty-eight hours of our reaching an agreement. I want you to read this manifesto, Palfrey. My sister and I have drawn it up with a great deal of expert assistance, with very great care, and with full determination. *That* is how the world of the future is going to be run."

Palfrey said: "I see." He took the folder. "May I read it out here?"

"Yes. Will you have a drink, or—"

"Nothing, thanks. Lord Wolhampton, as a matter of interest, will you tell me why you had Freda Piluski murdered? Why Johnny Woll was killed on Wenceslaus Hill? Why the four fishermen were killed in the forest? And why George Harmon was hunted?"

Each question came out with an incisiveness which Palfrey's manner had lacked for a long time past. He saw the other man's lips tighten and anger show in his eyes. The woman reacted in the same way.

"You cannot trust this man," she said harshly. "He lives and works and judges by all the old standards. It is simply not worth trying."

"Read the manifesto," Wolhampton ordered coldly. "Then I will answer your questions."

Palfrey said: "I'll certainly read it."

Wolhampton and his sister nodded briefly, and turned away. Palfrey moved slowly towards a concrete seat and sat down with the spray from the waterfall drifting close to him, the whole of the mini-

ature canyon at his feet. He opened the manifesto but he wasn't thinking about it. The woman distrusted and disliked him, of course, and he could hardly blame her. Wolhampton wanted from him something which he believed that only he, Palfrey, could give.

Palfrey began to read.

Within a few seconds he knew that he had read this, or something very like it, a dozen times before. It was a blue-print for a perfect world, a world of peace, prosperity, plenty, with every modern device; a world of luxury, of great learning and of culture. Here in precise detail were the terms in which civilisation could be made whole, theft and corruption, violence and fraud being entirely eliminated. There would even be world government, but it would be a rule imposed by a few.

There would be no political freedom.

There would be euthanasia on a widespread scale . . . "to rid the world of the evil of diseased minds and diseased bodies." All people who were mentally sick would be put into isolation, to live their lives out among those who were equally afflicted. As lepers.

Palfrey read on, his heart growing cold.

He finished after what seemed a long time, sat back, and closed his eyes. He thought he heard movement but did not look round, just leaned back with the spray very gentle on his right hand.

He felt a touch on his cheek.

Lady Stanhope said: "Is it so shocking, Dr. Palfrey?"

Palfrey said in a flat and hopeless voice: "It is hideous. Utterly hideous."

"So you hate perfection."

"We may strive for perfection. If it were imposed it would destroy itself."

She sat down, making him very conscious of her closeness.

"The world is destroying itself," she said.

"It is trying to save itself."

"And failing ludicrously. When are you going to realise that man has to be told what to do?"

"When are you going to realise that the world's problems are due to the fact that man has never been taught what to do, has never had the right kind of motivation. Man has to develop himself. Every tyranny in history has failed, each one ending in bloody slaughter."

"Because of one thing," Hilda Stanhope said mildly.

"What thing?" demanded Palfrey.

"No dictator has ever had *absolute* power."

"No dictator can ever have absolute power over the minds of men."

"Given two or three generations, a consortium of dictators with inherited powers can have absolute control. Palfrey, *listen* to me. I don't trust your motives, I don't like what you do, I don't believe you will help, but my brother is right, if you will help you can do more than any other man we know. You believe in the same ideals, you simply attempt to follow a different way of approaching them, an impossible way. You've been fighting like thousands have fought before you, on the basis of moral right and moral strength, to make people behave as they should. But they won't do it. They are wilfully blind. Far too much time has been wasted, far too many valuable lives flung away for the valueless ones. If we have another war all the strong and the healthy of body and mind will perish. If we follow the principles of the manifesto they will live for themselves and for the future, nor will they have to carry the burden of

the sick and the mentally diseased. *Palfrey, listen to me.* For countless centuries man has suffered for the sins of his forefathers. It is utterly wrong. It is evil incarnate. We can wipe out the past, we can kill off the dead wood or leave it to die and we can pour new life, new blood, into a world rebuilt.

"But it has to be done ruthlessly.

"The unworthy have to die.

"The millions who are ignorant and illiterate and diseased have to die.

"The criminals have to die.

"Imagine, Palfrey! See it in terms of the forests which are dead of the blight. Where the trees have been felled or broken, they have turned into dust, but those which have not been infected are as strong and sturdy as ever. It can be done with society as it has been done with the forests. But the useless must go."

Palfrey said: "I know exactly what you mean."

"You are a doctor. You know that there is only one thing to do with cancer. Cut it out! There is a cancer among society—in this country, in every country. It cannot be cured by palliatives, it cannot be patched up any more—it simply has to be cut away. It may mean the death of millions of people but they will die in any event. Dying this much sooner they will enable the rest of humanity, the flower of humanity, to live in conditions worthy of them. Don't *you* understand, Palfrey?" There was now a note of pleading in her voice.

Palfrey said with an effort: "Yes, I understand fully. But I don't agree."

He heard her catch her breath, and expected her to get up and move imperiously away. She did get up, only to stand in front of him. After a while she smiled.

"I didn't realise you were such a handsome man," she said and stretched out her hands. He took them,

warily. She pulled up and he rose to his feet so that they stood very close, still holding hands.

"My brother went exhaustively into your record and your family," she told him.

"I'd imagined I had been screened."

"You came very high in the list of potential leaders."

"I'm flattered," Palfrey said.

"Do you remember what the Mormons did in their trek from the Mississippi to Salt Lake City?" Hilda Stanhope asked.

"They were short of children and they introduced polygamy," answered Palfrey.

"They mated the healthiest men with the sturdiest girls, and they bred one of the finest races."

"Yes," Palfrey said, "so I've been told."

"We have bred some remarkable human beings, Palfrey."

"Oh," said Palfrey, and suddenly an idea flashed through his mind, almost in the form of a revelation. That was why the Canyon of All Seasons was being used. That was why a place had been elected where entrance was so difficult. *That was why they wanted him to draw off the armed forces*—for fear of what would be found. As these things came to his mind he masked his excitement, but there had been a momentary glimpse of it, which she must have seen. She said nothing, however, and Palfrey went on: "I don't think I like the idea of a human stud farm, Lady Stanhope."

"You really are impossibly old-fashioned," she said, but there was laughter in her eyes softening the touch of exasperation in her voice. "Why shouldn't human beings breed the best human beings there can be? What can possibly be wrong with it."

"Over-breeding," Palfrey said. "Take pekinese—"

"I refuse to take them, I prefer dalmatians—but we

aren't planning a human Cruft's you know. Palfrey—" she laughed again.

Palfrey smiled pleasantly: "Are you offering me my choice of—ah—sturdy wenches?"

"Attractive ones, too. Sap—*is* your mind absolutely closed?"

"I like to think not.'"

"Are you prepared to admit that you could be wrong about this?"

"I *could* be. I don't think I am."

"Will you listen to the case for it?" When he didn't answer she gave his hands a squeeze and then let go. "I was opposed to you, I didn't think there was any hope of opening your eyes, but my brother believes you are intellectually honest and not moved by prejudice. And he very much wants your help."

"Simply to draw off the investigation into the goings on at the Canyon of All Seasons?"

"No, not only that, although it must come first. But you have an organisation of hand-picked men and women who could work with us in creating the new world. There will be rebels and saboteurs, traitors and fools—and your men can do better than anyone else in rooting them out."

"Ah," said Palfrey. "A ready-made secret police force."

"Yes. And don't be hypocritical about secret police; that's what your agents are."

"In a way, I suppose," admitted Palfrey. "So that's why I'm wanted?"

"You're wanted because we know you would be invaluable. *Will* you listen?"

Palfrey thought, I'll have to listen. And he thought, I'll have to make them believe I might see the situation their way, it will be a waste of time and effort if I don't. Lady Stanhope was staring into his eyes, and he

had the uneasy feeling that she could read his thoughts. He had to convince her, nevertheless—and he had to be prepared for a trick. She was testing him, of course, and somewhere along the line there would be an attempt to prove to her brother that her impressions were right. She hadn't changed her thinking, only her tactics.

In an odd, unexpected way, he liked her for what she was doing now.

"Yes," he said. "I'll listen. But before I do you've got to understand one thing. I don't expect to be converted. I don't think as I do because of tradition, prejudice, habit or moral conviction. Simply from the common sense angle I think you're going about it the wrong way. I might come to concede that your motives are good, but I don't believe in your methods. I don't think you can make a new world by coercion or compulsion—you have to put the desire for knowledge and for self-improvement in man's mind. Then you'll be near perfection without any of the dangers which will come from doing it your way."

"What dangers?" Hilda Stanhope demanded.

"The danger that power will corrupt you. That if you breed your perfect human beings you will begin to want to kill off some for this reason, some for that. Some will become effete. Others—"

"They are all the old arguments we rejected years ago," Hilda interrupted impatiently. "I believe you to be influenced by traditional morality much more than you realise, but I'll still try to change your mind if you will listen, and look, and not fight it."

"Lady Stanhope," Palfrey said, "you fed me depressant capsules. You could feed me on drugs that would lower my resistance. If you do, anything I promise will be worthless."

"Yes," she said, "I know. Come and have a drink,

while the theatre is being made ready. I don't think my brother will be able to stay with us, there have been one or two problems to overcome—but I will be there all the time."

Palfrey asked mildly: "Supposing I still reject all you say?"

"Then you will be kept in isolation until we have made the world as we want it," said Hilda simply. "With the *fait accompli* you may change your mind. But I hope to change it for you, now."

"I'll tell you what I will do," said Palfrey, "I'll try to delay action at All Seasons Canyon for a while. May I send a message to my secretary?"

"Yes," said Hilda Stanhope. "But don't put any secret information in it. As you know, we *can* kill."

She took his arm and they walked along the rim of the model canyon and past the waterfall and the lake towards the building.

The Commander of the Armed Forces outside the Canyon of All Seasons received a telephoned order about the time that Palfrey stepped inside the Wolhampton building. It said:

Continue build-up with all available resources stop Allow Stefan Andromovitch complete freedom of action and make no move on the canyon without his express permission or unless he is missing for three consecutive days.

CHAPTER 16

The Argument

Palfrey stepped into the room where he had first seen Wolhampton and his sister. No one was here, but almost at once a door he had not noticed before opened, and a manservant came in with a laden trolley. He served with the anonymous efficiency of a well-trained servant, and Palfrey had a sense of luxury, even of well-being. They talked idly and he was glad of a chance to relax; he would need all his wits about him when Hilda Stanhope tried to convert him.

It was two hours after he had first come in when she said: "If you're ready, we'll start."

"Whenever you like," said Palfrey, and they both laughed; it was as if they were setting out for a casual jaunt. She led the way through the main doors to where the exquisite named Jones was waiting by a doorway over which lighted numbers glowed. This was a lift. The door slid open and they went up two flights, stepping out into a small private theatre. There was subdued lighting and about fifty comfortable reclining chairs.

"We show films to our overseas representatives here," said Hilda. "Most of the time Wolhampton House is used for strictly business purposes. You know of course that this is a form of international co-operative—individual firms producing our various products, while we arrange for the distribution and

the marketing. That way we maintain private enterprise and personal initiative with the advantages of bulk purchase and bulk selling."

"Yes, I know," Palfrey said. "Where would you like to sit?"

"This way, sir," Jones led them to two seats near the back and in the middle of the row. There was ample legroom, and when Palfrey sat back it was like sinking into feathers. Hilda sat next to him; he noticed again how beautifully she moved.

The lights dimmed.

A picture flickered on to the screen, vague and distorted at first, then very clear. It was of a man, naked except for a loin-cloth, well-proportioned, apparently in perfect physical condition. That faded and the picture of a young woman appeared, also naked except for the same brief strip of material. She was attractive, and entirely at her ease. As that picture faded another came; the two together. For a moment Palfrey thought this might after all be an obscene film, that the showing of it was simply an attempt to break down any sexual inhibitions he might have. The fear soon faded. The couple moved in a classic dance, and were soon joined by others; and after the dancing there were some displays of physical fitness drill, all carried out with simple competence.

The picture over, another replaced it—of a man so bent and mis-shapen that he seemed more animal than man; and he was joined by a woman with heavy, pendulous breasts, hunched shoulders and splay feet.

A voice spoke from the screen.

"*These four people are of the same age and were born in the same country. They are fully capable of having children. If they do . . .*"

A picture of a baby appeared, a dream-child, a cherub; and then another; and soon of the two, learn-

ing to walk, falling, laughing, running, jumping—until at the age of seven or eight, they vanished.

The speaker said, "*These are as the children of the first couple would be.*"

Palfrey was prepared for what came next; children obviously weak and deformed, who learned to walk clumsily or awkwardly, and did everything with obvious effort.

"*And these are the children of the second couple.*"

Palfrey felt Hilda touch his arm, as if to say: "You see?"

The scene changed to a panel of academic scholars, men of obviously high intelligence, talking about the arts, switching to science, then to eugenics. Almost as they faded a group of men of the same age appeared, plain, harsh-voiced, rough-mannered: they talked about beer and betting and women with a lewdness which accentuated the character of the scholars.

The man said:

"*Do you seriously believe that these men are equal? That all should have the same rights? That they were born equal? That nature intended them to live in the same way? The first are cultured men of great sensitivity, the second are little higher than the animals.*"

Palfrey felt the woman's fingers on his arm as she whispered:

"Do you think they should both have an equal vote? That each has as much to give society?"

Palfrey made no reply.

Another picture appeared—of an English village with pleasant people moving about, a few cars, a few vans, flowers growing outside a house, a gate smothered with ramblers. This scene was held for a few seconds and then switched to tenements where the walls had holes in them and the windows were boarded up, where bare-footed children played in

squalor. The scene shifted again but the contrast of subjects was the same: a stately home and a house which had hardly a slate on the roof or a whole window. A small country town in Scandinavia, spick and span, and a jungle village in the Far East. A hacienda in Spain or Mexico, a shanty town with open sewers.

Gradually, the scene changed to people.

There were tall, easy moving Scandinavians, lively, alert Southern Europeans, Chinese and Indians; and there were mobs of ill-clad, obviously starving people, their ribs sticking out, their faces like the faces of skeletons.

Or of ghosts.

There was a picture of a dormitory in a preparatory school, each boy peacefully asleep and pleasant to see, and a switch to a dormitory in an asylum, where congenital idiots lay or were propped up, ugly, grotesque. The time changed to morning as the schoolboys rose, lively and high-spirited—then came the idiots, who hardly stirred but grunted and groaned and had everything done for them.

It was—horrible.

The man said: "*You have seen the way of life of the people of this age. In my view if we attempt to keep both parts of society alive it will mean disaster for us all. Too many people live in abject poverty, in sickness, in imbecility. Their way of life cannot be improved; in fact, any effort to improve it will simply result in lowering the standards of the rest. In past ages, there were plagues and epidemics, underlining the natural law of the survival of the fittest. That is still the natural law, but we have tampered with it to the danger of the whole world; for there is not enough food, there are not enough natural resources, to carry the burden of the unfit, who according to nature's law never should have survived. So we need a new begin-*

ning. We have the means to free the world of the sick, the hungry, the under-developed people of all nations. All nations. This is no creed of race superiority. Negro and Aryan, Chinese and Indian, Scandinavian and American, Malayan and Egyptian—every nation has its fit and its strong and those who live off them, like parasites."

There was a long pause in which the pictures of the first healthy couple appeared again—and then the healthy, happy, children, then all the good and pleasing scenes. Superimposed on these were the words which were spoken by the commentator.

"*This is the world we can have for the asking. We can destroy what is bad and useless and we can strengthen what is good and what is fine in the human body, mind and spirit. Let us dedicate ourselves to the destruction of the old so that the new can be created. Let us put an end to the life which is unrewarding so that mankind can truly be born again.*"

The voice stopped.

The pictures faded.

The soft lights came on.

Hilda Stanhope was looking at Palfrey very intently, while he continued to stare at the dark screen. She had not moved for a long time, and he thought she too had been fascinated by the film. He sat in a chill of horror, debating only one thing: whether he should try to conceal what he thought, or whether he should try to pretend that he had been influenced favourably in any way. He felt her stir again; her fingers were cold on the back of his hand.

She said softly: "Sap."

He turned to look at her, glad of the dim light.

"Sap, can't you see? Don't you understand that if

there were only half, a quarter of the people in the world, what a wonderful world it would be?"

When he didn't answer she went on in a pleading voice: "You *must* see; a man like you can't be blind to what is best. Individuals are *not* important, except as steps in the perfecting of society. In war after war they have been sacrified for ideals which proved illusory. This one is not illusory. It is within our grasp. We can achieve perfection. Just as the trees died and were brought to life again, so mankind can be given new life. There is no way of healing the individual minds and bodies which have been damaged by the past, but we can save the best and make it even better, opening the way to a glorious future for mankind.

"Don't you see, Sap? Don't you *see?*"

Could he lie to her?

Could he hope to get away with it if he attempted to?

Could he pretend that he had been persuaded for a moment to feel anything but horror for this concept?

Was that even true?

The congenital idiots and the incurably sick—surely they *would* be better off dead. Could he hold to any single factor which would enable him to convince this woman that he might be converted?

"Don't you see?" she echoed. "Don't you *see?*"

At last, Palfrey stirred. And soon he said: "If that is the future of the world there *is* no future for the world. We can fight disease, we can persuade and educate people not to multiply, we can give them learning, we can improve conditions for them all, sometimes gradually, at other times spectacularly; but to eliminate half the world to improve life for the oth-

ers . . ." He hesitated, stood up, moved away from her and said: "If such a thing happened I would believe in the Devil."

In a tense voice, Hilda Stanhope said: "Don't destroy yourself, Sap. Please don't destroy yourself."

He did not know for certain what she meant, but he could guess.

"It's no use," he said. "I can't, I won't, pretend."

"Sap," she said in the same tense way, "I want to show you one more picture before you make up your mind."

He wanted to refuse to sit through more; he wanted to get out of this place which seemed to stifle him. But she took his hand and pulled him down, and he did not resist. The lights went dim again and a street scene appeared on the screen. He saw a group of people, backs to the camera, then sat up with a start, for one of them was himself.

He was walking with a Criminal Investigation Department Officer and with one of his own agents—that must have been about a month ago, when there was an investigation into some drug-running in the Far East. He reached a corner and waved to a taxi; the driver—the Jewish cabby who had brought him here—leaned out and opened the door. He himself shook hands with the two men and got into the cab.

"Do you remember?" Hilda asked.

"Yes," Palfrey said, brusquely.

The taxi disappeared.

He saw other shots of himself, in London streets, in New York, in Moscow, in the New Forum Hotel talking to Freda Piluski when buying cold capsules. Then, without a break in the film, there was a picture of massed trees—the trees of Christmas Valley. He was walking across the road with Sheriff Pike. Then Tom Blessing appeared with several other people with

whom Palfrey was vaguely familiar. He was lost among a crowd for a few moments and then appeared by the helicopter, climbing into it.

Of course, Wolhampton had a man at Christmas Valley.

Then he was shown an unfamiliar scene, the garden of a house he had never seen before. Something about it suggested a French background: a line of small poplars, the shutters open at the windows, a hedge which did not look English. He frowned as men appeared. There were three, in the distance, and the first he recognised was Lord Wolhampton. A woman—Hilda—came out of the house and walked towards the men; as they drew closer he saw that one of them was himself.

He stiffened.

The third man was a stranger.

The four talked earnestly for about two minutes, and Palfrey watched 'himself' with fierce attention. His heart beat very fast, almost choking him. He heard Hilda's breathing, shallow and even, by his side. In the film she stood away from the two men and looked down at something in her hand, then back at the man who was himself, and yet was not. She nodded as if in satisfaction, and spoke again. Palfrey saw 'Palfrey' turn and walk away. He knew he had one or two mannerisms as he walked, flicking his right hand sharply every now and again and letting his head droop forward. These were quite apparent here.

The man on the screen turned and approached the others again—and his right hand strayed to his forehead and began to coil a few strands of hair about his finger. Hilda laughed and clapped approvingly; and Lord Wolhampton also laughed with obvious satisfaction.

The picture faded and the lights went up.

Hilda asked in a low-pitched voice: "How do you like yourself?"

"Very clever," Palfrey said in an expressionless tone. "I was almost fooled for a moment. How long has that man been studying to impersonate me?"

"Three months," Hilda answered. "Wait." There was a pause for at least half a minute and then a voice —Wolhampton's.

"Do you think you are ready, Palfrey?"

"I do if you do, sir," the man said.

"You will be taking chances," Wolhampton said drily. "And they could be very grave chances."

"If they have to be they have to be," the man said casually.

Palfrey knew that everyone who knew him—*everyone*—would be sure that the voice was his; but it was not. For three months Wolhampton and his sister had been training this man to impersonate him, and it was a brilliant performance.

There could only be one reason.

If he, Palfrey, would not commit Z5 to a certain course of action, then this man would; and he would be able to get away with it for long enough to do grave harm.

CHAPTER 17

Ultimatum

"So you see, refusal to help will get you nowhere," Hilda Stanhope said, in her most assured voice. "Why don't you be sensible, and do what we ask? No one could blame you. You can't prevent us from doing what we set out to do, but you can help us to do it better. We need your help. We need humanitarians, such as you, Sap."

Palfrey said tonelessly: "I'm sure you do. Anyone who believes what you believe could all too soon become dehumanised."

"*You* wouldn't. I'm quite sure you wouldn't, any more than I should."

"But hasn't that already happened?" demanded Palfrey coldly. "Do you serious think you're still made of anything but material flesh and blood?"

Tight-lipped she looked away.

"Don't try me too far," she warned. "And don't forget we can put life back into those trees."

Palfrey said bitterly: "Yes. You have control over their life and death. You may think you have control over the life and death of the world but you never will have. The people you despise will be too much for you."

"Sap," Hilda Stanhope said, "if you don't undertake to work for us, you won't ever leave this place alive. I'm human enough not to want you to die. And you

can have such a wonderful life, everything you can possibly ask for."

"Even to starting a new dynasty," Palfrey said wryly. "You know as well as I do, it's quite impossible." He sounded very formal, almost pompous.

She gripped his arms above the elbows and shook him savagely.

"Don't be a stubborn fool! You've no chance at all unless you come in with us—absolutely no chance at all." She gripped with so much strength that for a moment he could not prevent her from jolting his head to and fro. It was almost as if she were going mad—would soon lose control absolutely. He stiffened his body in resistance but that did not make her stop. And she raised her voice with a strident note: "You fool, you utter fool, it's the only chance you have. Don't you understand? It's the *only* chance you have. I—"

He jerked himself free from her. She staggered and lost her balance, swayed backwards then forward so that he had to grab her to save her from falling. For a split second their faces were close, cheeks actually touching—and she whispered into his ear:

"Say 'yes', Sap. I hate it as much as you do. I'll help you."

"Say 'yes', Sap. I hate it as much as you do. I'll help you."

As Palfrey drew back from her she stood glaring at him, self-control apparently still lost, eyes sparkling, hands clenched as if she would strike him. But her lips moved silently.

"*Please*," she mouthed. "*Please, please, please.*"

Was she trying to tell him that she was working with her brother under threat, that she would help Palfrey and Z5? Or was this simply a ruse to make him prom-

ise to join them, perhaps to persuade him to commit himself in such a way that he would not be able to back out without doing irreparable harm to Z5, to the world he believed in?

He had never seen a woman look so distraught as she did now, and it heightened the tendency to coarseness in her features.

"*Please, please, please,*" she mouthed.

And then she shouted: "You fool, you've got to join us! It's the only way you can save the world from disaster. Don't you understand? *We can't do without you.*"

Was she honestly pleading with him to pretend to join them? Could there be any purpose in doing so? She seemed to be trying to talk with her eyes and with her manner. Was she afraid to speak frankly because the theatre was wired, because every word could be overheard?

That was almost certainly the case, but even if it were so, she could be fooling him, there could be a double purpose, a form of doublecross.

What harm could there be in pretending?

As that question came, he thought: how can I switch suddenly? If we're watched, if we're being overheard, a sudden change of attitude would be too transparent.

All of these thoughts passed through his mind as they stood watching each other, Hilda's breast heaving, her hands still clenched by her sides. Quite suddenly and in a different tone, Palfrey said:

"Oh, it's hopeless!"

"If it is, it's entirely your fault."

"It's impossible! God knows I can see you mean well, you really believe it would be for the good of mankind, but it's a hideous concept. Don't you see

that? It's robbing hundreds of millions of the right to live, laugh, love—"

She gave an almost imperceptible nod.

"—and no one has the right to do that."

"Sap, listen," she said in a quivering voice, "if you don't help we could choose the wrong people. You can't really believe what you say, you can't be as blind as all that. Millions are going to die, anyway. In India, in China, in the Arab countries, in South America, they're already dying like flies of starvation and disease we still can't prevent. If we could save everyone we would, but we can't, it simply isn't possible. There isn't enough food to go round, there isn't enough of anything. There are too many people in the world—you know that as well as anyone. Many of them are barely existing in a kind of living death. And they're picked off, haphazardly, the good and the bad, the strong and the clever, the weak and the foolish. That always happens if you leave things to nature. We can improve on nature by being selective, by saving the best physical and mental specimens of every nation so that we can breed a race of supermen from them all." She came forward and shook him again roughly; and, shaking him, her lips formed the word "please" until it was a supplication. "Things have changed, you know how they've changed. We're living in an age when we can travel to the moon, soon to all the planets. It's a new world, with new ideas and new concepts. *Sap, listen to me!*"

She let him go.

He muttered: "It's crazy—crazy!"

"The world as it *is* is crazy. You've seen how people die in the streets in India, you've seen those pot-bellied children who've never had a good meal in their lives, you *saw* those films. That's how the

world is today. That's the hideous truth. My brother and I want to put the world right. And we need your help, we need you to help us select the leaders. Apart from the secret police you talked about—" she caught her breath, "—we *know* you have the nuclei of survival parties all over the world. We *know* Z5 is the only organisation which could build the world anew if there were a nuclear war or some other disaster. You would select only first-class men—we need such men to build our world."

Palfrey said as if wonderingly:

"You know as much as that about Z5?"

"We know how it works and what it can do; we don't know how to work it."

"My double in the film—" began Palfrey.

"He could withdraw the forces from Christmas Valley, he might be able to send messages through your Headquarters to your world agents, but—he could easily fail. You can make sure of success. Think of the power you would have, second only to my brother, in the *world*."

Palfrey said harshly: "It's impossible!"

"It's the only way the world will survive—and the only way *you* can."

After a long pause, standing upright, still and tense, Palfrey said:

"Show me the film again, will you?"

"Yes, of course!" Excitement made her voice crack, as if hope had suddenly flared up in her. "Wait just a moment." She turned and hurried away and Palfrey watched her go, watched as she disappeared and he was alone in this tiny theatre with the blank screen and his own thoughts—and a simple fact he began to face.

She made sense.

There *were* good reasons for intelligent people to

doubt whether the world's teeming millions would ever survive to live a full life. There was a case for selecting those who could live in the best possible way. From Malthus and Owen to this present day there had been philosophers who had believed that nature had always used disaster and plague to control the growth of population. That control being now largely nullified by the intervention of man, reason might be on the side of correcting this unequal balance.

She wasn't as crazy as she had sounded.

Her voice came suddenly from the screen.

"I won't join you this time, Sap. Watch by yourself and *think*."

The film began . . .

He watched the scenes of horror in the crowded streets of eastern cities, the shanty towns, the starving children, the young women who looked like aged crones, the blind in their hundreds of thousands in Africa, the beggars with twisted limbs and grotesque faces, the bundles of rags which hid the bodies of the dying in Calcutta and Bombay, the primitives of Australia, the poor whites and the poor blacks of the Deep South of the United States.

Towards the end a voice sounded quietly:

"Is it human to keep these people alive? . . . Would it not be better to end their suffering? . . . Is it really our duty to rob ourselves and those among us who are sound in mind and body for such poor creatures as these? Should the healthy weaken themselves for the sake of those who are incurable? . . . Should the young support the old? . . ."

The voice trailed off.

Palfrey thought with savage intensity: *Should the young support the old?* My God, where will this lead to?

And he thought: How can I stop it?

And he knew that only if he pretended to go along with Wolhampton would there be even a chance of stopping it.

The light faded from the screen and the lights of the theatre came up, but he was left alone for a while, slumped in his chair, chin on his chest. It was very quiet. He could hear the man's voice and see those hideous pictures in his imagination. What was wrong with a world which permitted such suffering? How was it that riches stood cheek-by-jowl with poverty—not only in different parts of the world but in different parts of the same nations, of the same cities?

What could be done?

There was another question:

Who would say that anyone was wrong at least to try to find a way to put it right?

The Wolhampton plan was wrong, but it might possibly have been inspired by the highest motives. If nothing else, this had brought him, Palfrey, to an acute awareness of the conditions he had known about all his life but had never properly understood in terms of human misery.

He heard a rustle of movement, and glanced round. Hilda Stanhope was only a few feet away; in this dim light she looked almost beautiful.

"Well, Sap?" she asked gently.

Palfrey said: "I will consider it, but for that there must be time to think. Meanwhile you must give Stefan Andromovitch safe passage in All Seasons Canyon."

"He will be safe," Hilda asssured him, "we shall need his help too." She smiled as if she had heard the best news in the world.

There was an apartment in the Wolhampton build-

ing, leading off the offices which overlooked Hyde Park, and here Palfrey stood, watching by a window, men still cordoning off trees. There was something almost pathetic in the way they were preserving the dead timber, as if they—and the authorities—had some blind faith that one day all would be well. It was a pleasant afternoon, warm and sunny. The tall mast-like structure of the London Hilton stood starkly against the slow-drifting white clouds, blocks of luxury apartments breaking the skyline on the further side. In the park, thousands of people were reclining on deckchairs, enjoying the sun.

There were the young and the old.

The old were mostly alone, and he could believe, both sad and lonely, unless some form of inborn contentment comforted them in their last years.

Two beggars, unkempt and bearded, drifted along the path near Speakers' Corner.

A middle-aged woman came into sight, pushing a child in a wheel-chair—an invalid chair. Even from here the child's face showed pale and sickly.

Palfrey moved away.

He had been alone for some hours, and expected Wolhampton or his sister to come soon. He no longer had any doubt that he must appear to have been converted, but whether he could convince them was a long way from certain. He tried to picture what they might want him to do to prove that conversion. Certainly there would have to be some grand gesture, or some act from which there could be no withdrawal. If he failed—then certainly he would be one of the countless millions to die.

He moved to the other side of the apartment, looking down into the miniature canyon and marvelled at the detail, at those massed trees, at the fact that he had seen the dead trees come to life again.

He wondered how Stefan Andromovitch was faring in Christmas Valley.

Stefan, Harmon and the store-keeper Luke Shaw watched as Pike lowered the helicopter, bringing it down to a clearing at the side of the river. The sun was setting slowly and shadows were lengthening, adding to the indescribable beauty of the canyon. The different greens of the trees, gilded now by the sun, lent magnificence to the scene.

There was no one in sight.

The wheels touched, the engine gave a deafening roar and then slacked; the great revolving blades slowed and stopped and there was stillness and silence. Stefan uncoiled himself from an old car seat fastened to the floor by a rope, as Shaw slid the door open and got out. He was a hard-looking man of middle-age, with craggy features and shaggy eyebrows. Pistols stuck out from his hips but he did not touch them. His wide-brimmed hat was pulled low over his eyes as he looked about him. Stefan climbed down, and Sheriff Pike and Harmon followed him. All stood by the helicopter for several minutes and then began to move towards the river.

Pike said: "Four shots would be enough to kill us all."

"They may not want to kill us," Stefan said. "If one of you would prefer to stay here—"

"We'll stick together," Shaw said. "I can tell you this, mister. The main camp is round the other side of that cliff."

A mile along the river was a huge granite cliff, at least five hundred feet high. Nothing grew on the grey surface and only a few birds flew.

"We can take the dinghy," Pike said.

"I will swim," Stefan announced simply.

"Against that current? You're crazy!" Pike protested. "And even if you got round that cliff alone. you'd be at the mercy of anyone waiting on guard."

Stefan said: "I will put my clothes and some food and a compass in a water-proof roll, and swim. You three will wait for twenty-four hours, no more." He spoke as if there were no point at all in arguing, and began to strip.

The others strapped the water-proof roll to his back, and he waded into the river, the water hissing and splashing against his body.

"There goes the biggest hunk of man I ever laid eyes on," Sheriff Pike declared. "What I'd like to know is whether we'll ever see him again."

Then as they watched him the sheriff added: "My God! He swims like a porpoise. Look at the guy!"

CHAPTER 18

The Double

Stefan felt the chill of the water grow warmer as he plunged upstream. The river bottom was mostly of silt and there was a lot of silt in the water as it came swirling down. Just off the foot of the cliff were huge, jagged boulders. The river was a series of rapids there, but on the other side, although fast-flowing, it was much calmer. He made for this side, with slow easy strokes, knowing the danger of exhaustion. He kept his head high and as he neared the bend in the river saw what had been hidden before—a group of wooden buildings set beneath trees which served as camouflage, hiding them from the air. There were dozens of green tents among the trees, too, and they led up to the face of the rock.

As far as he could judge, from this level, the natural caves in the rock had been widened. At the entrance to them, moving among the trees, he saw people, most of them young. For a while he fought comfortably against the race; then suddenly he was swimming madly for dear life, and could think of nothing else. Breathless, gasping, he reached calmer water, turned over on his back and floated for a few moments until he could breathe more easily.

Then he turned and headed for the shore.

As he did so three men came out of one of the larger caves, and approached. He was quite sure they

had seen him—and now he saw look-out men on ledges and niches in the rock. He did not feel fear, as such; there was some quality in him, of fatalism, which enabled him to go from one task to the next quite free from apprehension.

But suddenly, he reared up—astounded.

The middle man of the three was *Palfrey*—looking towards him with beckoning gestures, and smiling broadly. As Stefan drew nearer he saw him make a kind of thumbs up sign which was quite uncharacteristic. Stefan noticed it without paying attention, his mind filled with surprise at seeing Palfrey, whom he had thought to be hundreds of miles away.

There was a smooth rock under Stefan's feet when he stood up. He waded, waist deep, ankle deep, until he reached a sandy beach where the three men waited. 'Palfrey' came forward and put out both hands, another unusual gesture.

"So you managed it," 'Palfrey' exclaimed in obvious satisfaction. "You didn't expect me, I'll wager."

"I didn't dream—" Stefan began, then broke off and asked: "What happened? Why are you here?"

"It's going to work out better than I expected," 'Palfrey' told him. "Our friends aren't as villainous as we thought, they've a lot of very valuable ideas." He motioned to the others: "Mr. Godfrey Sanderson, of Washington, and Dr. Eubesio of the Argentine." The other two men were young and sharp-eyed. "They both work with the Wolhampton Paper Corporation."

Stefan said slowly: "With Lord Wolhampton?"

"That's right," Sanderson replied. "I am the President of the American Company and Dr. Eubesio is President of the South American Corporation. And we are very glad we have been able to come to terms with Dr. Palfrey!"

'Palfrey' smiled. "And I mean that, Stefan."

Stefan Andromovitch thought: This is wrong. Sap wouldn't come to terms. Sap wouldn't talk like this, unless he were drugged; brainwashed. That was the obvious conclusion and he did not think beyond it. Quite formally, he said. "I am very glad to hear it."

They turned and walked up the beach towards what seemed to be the main cave. Now that he was nearer Stefan saw that it was enormous—so large that he could not see how far it stretched ahead or on either side. There were shops and single storey houses, a swimming pool, restaurants—it was like a well-designed and prosperous resort. There was no road, as such, but moving platforms ran like the spokes of a wheel from some distant hub. People stood on these, some walking briskly, some idling. The people were all young. They were dressed in the same kind of clothes but not in uniform. The women had short skirts and blouses with shallow V-necks, the men wore shorts and loose-fittting shirts. Every variety of colour was worn, but the cut and general appearance was much the same.

All of them were healthy and fit-looking, and all walked with a spring in their step. Their eyes were bright and there was a kind of gaiety about theit attitudes. Stefan had never seen a more normal crowd or a more attractive one.

"In here," 'Palfrey' said, and led the way into one of the houses.

Another question mark entered Stefan's head. *Palfrey* led the way, not one of the others. How had he come to know the place so well, and how was it that he took precedence over the two corporation presidents?

'Palfrey' stepped into a large, attractive room with several doors leading off it.

"If you would like to shower, Stefan, we'll have some food sent in meanwhile. Then you can look round and see why we've come to terms." He opened a door leading to a blue-tiled shower room. Ten minutes later, wearing the lightweight clothes he had carried with him, Stefan went into the large room. In one corner a buffet meal was laid out, the centrepiece an enormous turkey, with a ham, smaller birds, Scotch eggs, salads, each a feast in itself. Behind the table was a tall blonde, dressed like all of the other women, but with the V of her blouse more provocatively cut. Near her was another blonde, equally tall, with the palest grey eyes Stefan had ever seen. She stood at a trolley bearing bottles of every variety of aperitifs and spirits. Both the women looked at him with flattering admiration.

"Dr. Palfrey will be here in a few moments, sir," the girl at the trolley said. "You will have a drink now?"

"A vodka and water, please," Stefan said.

"Vodka, I would have been sure of it." As the woman brought him his glass, their fingers touched. Hers were cool, but the glance she gave him was not. There was something in the simplicity of Stefan's face and the directness of his eyes which made him seem almost naive—easy to impress, perhaps easy to seduce.

"Have you been here long?" he inquired.

"For many years," the first woman answered. "My name is Elsa. I am from Norway, but perhaps you guessed that."

"I have been here for many years also," said the girl who had served his drink. "I am Anna, from Germany."

"Do you like it here?"

"It is beautiful," Anna said. "We are all very happy. We have everything we desire, you understand.

Everything." There was something both sweet and sinister in the beguiling way she looked at him. "You were surprised to find such sophistication, yes?"

"I thought only lumber-jacks worked in All Seasons Canyon."

Elsa laughed. It was surprising how alike they were, how similarly they laughed and talked, as if they had been well-trained and they were saying exactly what they had been told.

"There are lumber-jacks in the forest but in the nurseries there are only people of the new world. It is a wonderful world here," she went on. "No one is ever ill; no one is ever angry. There is plenty of everything we need—" she laughed again, "—even of men! It is a very wonderful place, sir—and there is only one sad thing."

"What is so sad?" asked Stefan.

"There is nowhere else like it in the world. If all the world were like the Canyon of All Seasons—" she broke off, half sighing, half smiling. "But it is not possible, people are such fools. You are not drinking very fast."

"No, one drink is enough," Stefan said.

As he spoke 'Palfrey' and the others came in with several men and women; all youthful, mostly handsome, all gay and animated. They circulated freely, and 'Palfrey' introduced one after the other, the American, Sanderson. supplying names which 'Palfrey' forgot. 'Palfrey' was gayer than Stefan could ever remember.

". . . I've been astonished, Stefan, by what they've achieved here. I could hardly believe it when I was told that everyone comes from an under-privileged stratum of society—from orphanages, children's homes, shanty towns. They were selected and offered work in the United States, and brought here. What

they've achieved in the Canyon of All Seasons is quite astonishing."

"That is true," Eubesio confirmed. "When I first heard of this I didn't really believe it was possible or right, but now . . ."

"And there's another thing," said 'Palfrey'. "After we've eaten, I'll show you what nonsense it is to talk about inborn racial enmity. There are inter-racial groups, Israelis and Arabs, South Africans and Basutos, Chinese and Spaniards, Indians and Chinese, living together in exactly the way you and I have always dreamed of, Stefan. We can have a world which is near perfection. We can have Utopia! Only, we mustn't try to support too many people. They must be thinned out—like the trees."

"That's right," Sanderson put in eagerly. "That is the beauty of the discovery, Mr. Andromovitch—trees can be thinned out at little cost and in a tenth of the time now required. The commercial advantages are quite beyond price."

They ate their fill, every morsel and every sip delicious.

They went out, through the city within the cave: a model city in which the artificial light was like daylight; there was even a simulation of sunlight, too. Everybody was gay, attractive, obviously healthy; there was drinking and swimming, theatre and television, lecture halls, shops of every kind.

". . . There is no night and no day in the city," Sanderson remarked. "Whenever the People of the Seasons want to come out, they come; the darkness of night is reserved for the privacy of their own homes. There is no crime and no need for crime; no resentments, no sense of injustice. Everyone is fairly treated and knows that to be so. Do you know Mr. Andromovitch, we have not had one case of theft, or

crime of any kind. As you move about you are seeing the people of all races, colours and creeds mixing freely and naturally. You *can* see this, can't you?"

It was so. There were Negroes and Aryans, Indians and Chinese, Jews and Arabs, all fine-looking people, all members of the same city without the slightest indication of enmity.

Stefan thought almost in spite of himself: it *is* remarkable.

"Stefan," 'Palfrey' said, "you must be tired. Why don't you have an early night and then talk in the morning?"

Stefan said: "There are some friends of mine in the forest."

"They'll be all right," 'Palfrey' chuckled. "When I came and saw all this I told Sanderson you and everyone with you must have a safe passage. No harm will come to them."

"Sap," Stefan said, "I don't understand why you have changed so much."

"Because I've seen so much," 'Palfrey' said simply. "You have that early night, now."

"I should like to," replied Stefan.

"I thought you would! I'll show you to your rooms and leave you. I've a lot of reports to write and I must send a message to Joyce. She'll never rest until she knows I'm all right."

Stefan thought: 'This is not Palfrey. Palfrey would know that Joyce would feel no alarm if she knew he had come here in peace. There had been other indications, and this was the last: this man was not Palfrey.

He allowed 'Palfrey' to take him to a pleasant two-room apartment, with an outer living-room and a bedroom, where there was television, radio and music piped in, a wide bed turned down, a soft light, a telephone, slippers large enough for him, a bathroom lead-

ing off in one corner. No one could want more. He said goodnight to 'Palfrey' and sat in the chair, with a feeling of desperation and of hopelessness which he now showed in his expression.

The man was not Palfrey so—was Palfrey dead? The possibility sent a shudder through him.

Obviously the river and the lake would be watched. But he might be able to get out of the canyon if he could reach the river. He had seen the falls from the air and knew how far they fell, but it might be possible to find a foothold at one side.

If he got out he could at least warn Z5 everywhere.

If he . . .

He heard a tap at the outer door. It puzzled him, being light, almost timid. As he stood up it was repeated, and he went across and opened the door.

A youth stood swaying there.

He had several days' growth of black beard, his eyes were bloodshot, there were bruises on his face and a weal across his right cheek where the blood had dried. He leaned against the door jamb, and his knees seemed to buckle. Stefan put an arm round him and felt the way he collapsed. He drew him inside—and as he did so a high-pitched whine of sound rose, startling in its intensity.

Terror flared in the youth's eyes.

Stefan closed the door and said reassuringly: "It's all right, my friend. It is all right."

The youth said hoarsely: "It's not Palfrey. Not—Palfrey." He raised his head and looked with piteous entreaty into Stefan's eyes. "I heard them say—you were fooled, you thought it was Palfrey. Do you—understand me? *Not*—Palfrey."

The whining sound drew nearer and seemed to convey menace. It reminded Stefan of a police car in any American city.

"Not Palfrey," the youth muttered. "I'm Clive—Clive Thomas. Not Palfrey. They'll kill you if—if—if—" he drew in a shuddering breath. "They—they'll kill me."

As the last word came out, there was a loud knock at the outer door.

CHAPTER 19

The Elixir

Clive Thomas was quivering violently, terrified by the banging. Stefan heard his gasping breath, his clattering teeth. There would be no hope of hiding him from the callers, the noise would give him away. The banging was repeated.

"They'll kill—" Clive began.

Stefan struck him sharply beneath the chin; his teeth snapped together and his eyes rolled. Stefan saved him as he fell and lifted him easily, carrying him into the bedroom. He put him on the floor by the side of the bed and pushed him under, then went to the other room as the banging started again. He opened the door and stood blocking it, huge and forbidding.

Three men, one of whom he had seen before, stood there; each carried a revolver.

"Has a man been here?" one of the three demanded.

Stefan said gruffly: "Three men—in front of me."

"A short, dark-haired man—"

"No one has been here before you," Stefan said, "and I was sleeping."

"I am sorry, Mr. Andromovitch, but this man is a dangerous lunatic. If he comes here—"

"He has not been here." Stefan wilfully misunderstood the last sentence. "If you wish, come in and search."

"No, there's no need. If he comes lift the telephone and dial 111, please."

"What is 111?" asked Stefan.

"Security," the man said, already looking away. "Be very careful, this man is armed."

"I will be careful."

The three turned away. Stefan did not go back immediately but stood watching from the doorway. Several other groups of men, all armed, were moving about, entering shops and doorways. Several small electric cars with sirens on the roofs, stood about. Down by the river the night was a blaze of light, obviously from searchlights placed on the cliff. At least a dozen men were there and one boat was being pushed off.

Stefan closed the door and went back to the bedroom, smiling very tautly. He knelt down and drew Thomas from under the bed, laid him on it, and took off his shoes and loosened his belt. The youth wore ordinary jeans and a check shirt, the jeans torn, the shirt buttonless.

Stefan pulled the shirt aside—and winced. There were burn marks—branded burns, only just beginning to heal. He drew the shirt off and eased Thomas over on to one side. His back was a mass of red weals. There was nothing in the apartment which would soothe these. Stefan went into the bathroom and took a sponge and towel, came back and gently cleansed the wounds. Thomas began to stir. Stefan dabbed him dry, rinsed the sponge and washed his face and hands.

Thomas's eyes flickered open.

"It's all right—they have gone," Stefan assured him. "You can rest."

The frightened eyes showed that Thomas did not understand.

"You can rest," Stefan repeated. "I will make coffee. Have you had any food lately?"

"I—no. No. No food."

Stefan said: "I have some here."

In the refrigerator there was milk, fruit, cream, butter, bacon, eggs, bread and—by the side—cornflakes. He made coffee and poured milk over the cereal. When he got back, Thomas was sitting up, leaning heavily against the pillows. The worst of the haggard look was gone, and his eyes lit up at the sight of the food. He ate slowly and deliberately, however, and sipped the hot coffee in between mouthfuls.

He began to talk.

"I came three days ago . . . my wife was with me. She—she thought it was wonderful . . . We'd come for a camping vacation . . . we were kidnapped when we were going away from Christmas Valley. That's the only word, kidnapped. At first the people were friendly, they wanted to know about a man named Harmon. They thought he was a spy—*I* thought he was a murderer but the men who kidnapped us said they'd killed Johnny Woll and would kill us if we didn't do what we were told . . . They wanted to know if he'd told Harmon or me anything about the valley. Deidre, that's my wife . . ." He closed his eyes when he mentioned her, and paused for a long time before going on, "she told them I'd talked with Johnny a lot . . . and I had . . . They took me into a cell then and . . . you can see what they did. They were terrified in case I knew something about the elixir."

"Elixir?" echoed Stefan.

"They—they can put life *back into the trees.*" Thomas muttered. "I've seen them . . . seen them working . . . That's why they killed those fishermen. *They'd* seen them working . . . They store the elixir in special containers and spray it over the soil

. . . Don't know what it is but they're so scared that someone will find out the formula, it must be easy to make . . ."

His voice began to crack.

"Do you know where I can get some of the elixir?" Stefan asked softly.

"They keep it in small caves . . . always guarded though . . . Can't mistake it, it's in green containers. Not red, that destroys the trees . . . green . . . light green." His eyelids were drooping, his voice was fading, suddenly he gave a huge yawn.

Stefan eased him down on his pillows, covered him with a light blanket, and left him. He sat back in the big chair, thinking, almost sure of what he had to do, hating part of it but knowing that it was inevitable. At last, he stirred himself, fetched the waterproof roll, then put out the lights and opened the door and looked out into the city.

No one was about. Some floodlights were off, mostly single lights showed at the entrance to the cave. He went back, took a sheet of paper and wrote on it: *If you harm this man further you will be punished with the utmost severity*. It was little enough but it might help. He went out again, reached the exit to the cave, and saw two men standing close together and talking. Near them was a searchlight on a swivel base, obviously used for lighting up the river. He called:

"Good evening!"

They spun round, as if terrified.

"Since I was woken I could not sleep," Stefan explained, recognising the man who had asked him about Thomas. "Is the lunatic caught?"

"He tried to swim," the man answered. "No one can survive in the rapids."

"They are very bad," Stefan said, smiling faintly, "but I survived. You are still on guard?"

"The smaller caves are always under guard," the man replied. "Don't go near them."

Stefan half-turned as if heading back for his apartment, then he spun round and gripped each man by the throat. His huge fingers almost spanned them, the power he exerted was the power of a noose being tightly drawn. The men began to kick and struggle but he held them at arm's length. They clutched and scratched at his wrists but as he choked the life out of them their efforts became weaker, and soon they went limp. He held them for a few seconds longer then let them fall, drawing them into the shadow of a doorway.

Each man was dead; there had been no other way of making sure they could not raise an alarm.

Stefan took the keys from the spokesman's pockets, then walked towards the smaller caves.

Inside the first one, two men with rifles were standing at ease. Stefan strolled up to them and spoke in English; neither seemed to understand. He spoke in Russian, then in French and there was much head-shaking and smiling. There was enough light inside the cave to show the stacks of green tins.

One moment they were all laughing.

The next, Stefan had them by the throat.

Soon, he unlocked the barred doors.

The cans of the elixir were about the size of a seven pound can of paint. He took two and wrapped them in the waterproofing, then strapped them to his back. He did everything with extreme deliberation, making sure he made no mistakes. When he was finished he turned and walked along the face of the cliff to the river. No one appeared to be in sight, but the

single searchlight, swivelling round, lit up a stretch of the river all the time. There was no way of putting the light out.

Stefan went to the spot where he had landed. The huge granite rock towered above him; close to the rock the water would be very deep. He waited for the light to fall on the face of the rock at the river's surface and then waded in, keeping just behind the light. The ground beneath his feet fell away suddenly and he was forced to swim. He struck out, helped this time by the current; but the current was also his enemy, for he could not slacken speed in time to go under and so avoid the light as it shone upon the water.

The beam stopped moving. He dived, but knew that he had been seen. As he surfaced again he heard the sharp crackling of shots, saw spurts of water just in front of him. He flung himself to one side, and put every effort he could summon into each stroke. Now the speed helped, but more lights shone and there was a fusillade of shots. He felt a sharp pain in his left thigh, but it did not stop him pounding through the water. Every time he opened his eyes he saw the spurts of water as the bullets sprayed, but he was not hit again.

They would send a boat, of course—but the boat could not shoot the rapids.

Could *he?*

He was carried along now at furious speed, battered by the rapids, flung violently against rocks. Desperately struggling to hold his breath, he felt himself being thrown over the edge, into the great falls. All thought, feeling, even fears were drained out of him as he hurtled down and down; then suddenly a fountain of water picked him up bodily and tossed him into the near-calm of the lake at the foot of the rapids.

Soon he was on the surface, on his back, breathing, half-conscious, keeping afloat almost out of habit. Gradually he regained his senses, turned over and began to swim.

He saw a fire at the side of the lake.

Ten minutes later, Sheriff Pike and Harmon were helping him ashore.

The Commanding Officer of the force in Christmas Valley shook Stefan's hand, and said briskly:

"Didn't expect to see you again, sir. That's a fact. Your mission accomplished, I imagine."

"Yes, sir," said Stefan.

"What is your opinion of any chances of invading the place you've been to?"

"I think there is only one way," Stefan said. "It is already blocked off at one end; you would be able to seal off the lake end with very little difficulty. I don't think you would ever capture it, and I am not sure it would be a good thing. If it is sealed off so that no one can ever escape, the danger to the trees will be gone. And if they will not surrender you will have to destroy them."

"My assessment of the situation exactly," the Colonel said. "Glad you agree. Now! You want to get away, I guess."

"Yes. sir, at once. Is there any message from Dr. Palfrey?"

"No," the Colonel answered. "There is a direct line to London kept open for you, however. A woman named Morgan, Joyce Morgan, wants to talk to you."

"Stefan," Joyce said, "Sap telephoned yesterday. He is being held prisoner at Wolhampton House but doesn't want us to take any action. He sounds—" she broke off.

"Go on," Stefan said.

"He has been different ever since this case began," Joyce said. "When I talked to him, it was almost as if he'd been persuaded to work with the other side. I don't understand him."

"Please do nothing until I arrive," Stefan requested. "Except to warn our laboratory that I shall bring with me some specimens of an elixir which gives new life to the trees."

Palfrey sat in a big board room in Wolhampton House, with Hilda Stanhope at one end, and her brother at the other. Several men sat on either side, all of them executives of the group, all of them very much with Wolhampton in his campaign for world domination. Palfrey was still not absolutely sure that he could rely on Hilda Stanhope, was not sure what she planned. Wolhampton now talked and behaved as if he took it for granted that Palfrey was a convert.

The most astonishing fact was the absolute assurance with which Wolhampton talked, and the comprehensiveness of his plans.

"We have the nucleus of government in each country," he announced, "but we shall of course find a great deal of direct and indirect opposition. Skeleton cabinets have been formed and the takeover in each country will be when the country's existing government resigns. In some cases, of course, they will cooperate—and that is where you come in, Palfrey. Your agents must find out which members of various governments are reliable, and which are likely to spread disaffection."

"What are we to do with any who are unreliable?" Palfrey asked.

"We have no choice, of course—they will be killed. It would be folly for us to use unreliable leaders

when we can be sure of so many. I trust you are not a sentimentalist over such matters, Palfrey. Either you are with us or you are against us."

Palfrey said: "The fact that I'm with you doesn't mean I like killing. After all, some of the unreliable men might be converted. We need all the first class brains we can get."

"We can take no risks at all," Wolhampton said flatly.

"You forget that I have had the confidence of governments for twenty years," Palfrey said icily. "I have been the judge of men who can be trusted, and I have not had to consult anyone. Either you trust me, or you don't. I won't work with you except under conditions of absolute trust."

He could sense the rising tension with every word he uttered. He thought he saw a gleam of approval in Hilda Stanhope's eye, but he could not be sure. He felt Wolhampton's gaze on him, cold with disapproval. The man had been used to absolute command for so long that he found it hard to accept any kind of opposition.

"Palfrey," he said. "any man who is or might be unreliable *must* die. There is no choice."

The tension was at breaking point; Palfrey met the cold fury of Wolhampton's eyes—and then saw a light glow in the desk in front of him. Wolhampton picked up the telephone, and said sharply:

"I told you not to disturb me."

He listened . . .

He said in an unbelieving voice: "*My God!*"

He listened again and then slowly put down the receiver. Cold and expressionless, his words came at last:

"Your friend Andromovitch has escaped from the canyon with samples of the elixir. He is now on his

way to London." As the men round the table seemed to freeze in their places, he went on: "Palfrey—you will be taken, under guard, to meet him wherever he lands. You will bring him here, with the elixir. When you are both here, and when the Russian is dead, I will trust you sufficiently to give you the absolute authority you desire.

"But not until then.

"And the first thing you will do is telephone your headquarters to find out exactly when and where Andromovitch is due."

CHAPTER 20

The Betrayal

Palfrey sat very still and silent. Every head turned towards him, and Hilda Stanhope made a little gesture, almost of resignation. It was not warm in the room but there was perspiration on Palfrey's forehead. He wondered how long the others would remain silent, how long Wolhampton's unnatural calm would last.

Wolhampton placed his hands palms downward on the table, and said with great deliberation, "If you do not pick up the telephone at once and make the inquiry, you will be taken from here and put to death by poisoning. I am not playing, Palfrey."

Palfrey's hand strayed to his hair.

"Not playing with fire?" he asked, almost absently. "I think you are. May I be frank?"

Wolhampton said drily: "I must admit I have never known you to be anything else."

Palfrey still played with his hair.

"Thank you, my lord. You ask me to use Z5 to seek out those who might not be loyal. You state that if a man hesitates to show his loyalty, he must be killed. You have heard me say clearly that I have doubts of the wisdom of what you are doing. I don't in fact think you can do what you set out to do. Although I saw the trees come back to life, there may have been some kind of deception—"

"Nonsense!" The interruption came sharply. "The elixir is unfailing. You are simply wasting time."

Palfrey patted the curl back on to his forehead.

"I don't think so. My decided opinion is, that you have proved your complete lack of understanding of your fellow man. You under-estimate the resistance you will meet, and how quickly it will grow. I don't think you would make a very good world leader—my lord."

Wolhampton raised his hands as if in disbelief.

"*What* did you say?"

"I don't think you would use your power properly," Palfrey said mildly. "I think you believe it can be run as a business, with people as cyphers. They are not cyphers. They—"

"That is enough!" Wolhampton, deathly pale, picked up the telephone again.

"I think he's right," Hilda Stanhope said.

Her voice was low-pitched, but steady and clear. It had the effect of staying the movement of her brother's hand, of making everyone turn and look towards her. She was quite composed, even her eyes were calm.

"You've never realised that people are people," she went on.

Wolhampton exploded: "Hilda! Have you gone mad?"

"No, Leslie, it is you who have gone mad. When you first began to talk about world domination I thought it was simply hot air, but when I learned that you could actually destroy trees and bring them back to life I realised how serious it was." She glanced at Palfrey. "It happened so quickly, Dr. Palfrey, there was no time to do anything about it. Through the Wolhampton Corporation with its allied and associ-

ated businesses Leslie was able to strike very quickly indeed. I would have been suspect had I tried to warn you; that is why I waited until you were brought here to show you that I think my brother is a megalomaniac who must be placed under restraint. I could not see how, but I believed that if you pretended to come with us the immediate crisis would be over. And it was. But with this new development—"

Wolhampton listened in a stupor of surprise.

"*Hilda.* My own—sister. We have dreamed of this together. That this should come from you, the one person in the world I was sure I could rely on." He looked at her, his eyes blank, unrevealing. "You can't mean what you say."

"I mean every word," she insisted. "If you kill Palfrey—"

Palfrey said: "But he isn't going to kill me, Lady Stanhope."

"You fool!" Wolhampton roared. "You won't live five minutes. One injection and you will go out—poof! Like that." His eyes were glaring as he snatched up the receiver and shouted: "Jones—come in with the equipment, hurry!" He stood up, quivering with rage. "You'll see, Palfrey—and Hilda, my God! I can't even let you live. I can't let anyone live if they are disloyal. I warned you, God knows I warned you." He glanced round as the door opened and Jones came in, carrying a small metal box.

"Jones—" began Wolhampton.

"Jones," said Palfrey, "in my hand I'm holding a very small container of a powerful explosive." He smiled quite broadly. "I keep it in my hair, where no one ever thinks of looking if I am searched. It is very powerful indeed. If you bring that hypodermic syringe nearer I shall throw it. The room and everyone in it will be destroyed."

He held out his hand, palm uppermost, and showed the lock of false hair.

One of the others gasped: "If you throw it you'll kill yourself!"

"Oh, yes," agreed Palfrey. "That's a risk I've lived with for a long time. Stefan Andromovitch is free, and he has some of your elixir. It is only a matter of time before it can be produced in large enough quantities to restore the forests. All Seasons Canyon is so vulnerable that at a single command it can be cut off from the world. You have one headquarters there, another here. If this one is made useless, and with our death it will be, at least the world has nothing to fear."

Jones was staring at him.

"Jones," he said, "have you an ordinary sedative in your little box?"

"Er—yes, sir," Jones said.

"I think Lord Wolhampton requires a sedative."

Wolhampton sprang to his feet and leapt towards him, but before he got halfway round the table, others seized and held him fast. Three men made a protective circle round Palfrey, as Jones approached the screaming and writhing Wolhampton with a loaded hypodermic syringe.

He jabbed.

Almost instantaneously Wolhampton slumped across the table, while the other men drew away from Palfrey. Only Hilda Stanhope drew near. She was pale and a little shaky, but she was smiling.

"Sap," she said unsteadily, "I was afraid you wouldn't trust me."

"And I was afraid I couldn't trust you," Palfrey said. He took her arm. "I should have known better. Hilda, how many of these men knew about the murders?"

She answered: "I don't think any of us knew. Les-

lie had a few men who worked only for him and none of us were told exactly what they did. Why?"

"It's quite obvious that only experts in forestry and the executives of the various businesses associated with Wolhampton can get the forests going again, and can help to undo the damage that's been done." Palfrey smiled faintly. "If we could rely on the loyalty of each of you—"

"You can count on me, Palfrey!"

"I was always worried."

"I actually opposed him on some counts; Lady Stanhope will bear me out there."

"I will do anything—anything, Palfrey!"

They would do anything, Palfrey reflected, to save themselves.

He was back in his office, waiting for Stefan, going through the reports which had already come in from the Canyon of All Seasons. Instructions had already been sent from Washington for the Colonel to present an ultimatum to the inhabitants of the canyon: to surrender without conditions, or be destroyed.

There was no other choice.

A green light glowed and he picked up the speaker.

"Hallo! Joyce?"

"Stefan's here," she announced.

Palfrey's face lit up. "Wonderful!" He moved towards the door, but it opened before he reached it. There was Stefan—and by his side, a little embarrassed, was Harmon.

"How good to see you!" Palfrey gripped his hands and gripped Stefan's. "Come and sit down. You've heard that we had the breaks and everything is going to work itself out."

"We heard that we nearly didn't have a Dr. Palfrey," Stefan said, drily. The look of rugged saintliness

was a little startling as he sat down, stretching out his long legs, telling the story from the moment he had reached the Canyon of All Seasons. Harmon was brought into the narrative time and time again, until Stefan said finally: "And Harmon is both able and prepared to join us, Sap, in the search we shall have to make in all the forests for supplies of both the blight carrier and the elixir."

Harmon said: "I hope you'll ccept that offer, Dr. Palfrey. I've wanted to help from the time I first talked to Johnny Woll, and even more after Rakowitz died. I've a lot of debts to repay."

"We can certainly use you," Palfrey said. There was no need to add that it might be months before Harmon was fully investigated and could be given confidential work. As that thought passed through Palfrey's mind his heart leapt at the realisation that he could go on planning, that the danger had really lifted. If only the people in the canyon would surrender . . .

Word came next morning, cryptic and wholly satisfying:

Have accepted unconditional surrender ample supplies chemical available processing plant intact Clive Thomas alive stop Sheriff Pike's compliments.

"Compliments!" Harmon almost exploded.

"Compliments," echoed Stefan. "How exactly like him. And how glad I am that Thomas is alive." The satisfaction showed in his face as he went on: "I do not know how his marriage will work out, he was so distressed because his wife was willing to accept the new world which he hated."

Harmon said: "I think he will find that she only pre-

tended to accept it, in a desperate attempt to save his life. I can tell you two other things, Dr. Palfrey."

"Yes?"

"The fishermen who were killed had discovered a way up river, and had spent the day looking round—they would have talked as soon as they got back to the village. And—Rakowitz killed himself when he realised what the experiments had done to the trees. He had no idea of what was being planned."

"One of the odd things about this affair is that so much of the scheme was known only to Lord Wolhampton himself," said Palfrey. "He trusted no one until he had to, even his sister was appalled and astounded when she discovered just how far he meant to go."

Even as he said it, he wondered—

Had she pretended to go along with her brother in hopes of bringing him back to sanity, and deflecting the whole scheme? Or had she gone along with him as determined on the new world as he, only betraying him to save herself when she saw at last the scheme must fail?

The truth, so often and so inaccurately called simple, thought Palfrey, was that he would never know.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES ON JOHN CREASEY

One of the major factors in John Creasey's ever-increasing popularity is undoubtedly his talent for viewing and so portraying his characters as living beings: each with his own special problem, each with his own hopes and dreams and fears. John Creasey has now written nearly 500 books, and in essence this extraordinary achievement is a testament to his penetrating observation and understanding of human behaviour. Criminals, their victims, the police—all he writes of are touched with this very real compassion.

He has long been noted for his use of sociological and industrial backgrounds (*A Gun for Inspector West*—1953, and *Death in Cold Print*—1961, are typical examples), portraying each with meticulous accuracy while demonstrating how the life of any man, in any walk of life, may be affected by the activities of criminals hitherto unknown to him. As his researches deepened his lifelong interest in social and political affairs, he soon turned part of his great energy to campaigning for National Savings, United Europe (1945-50), Road Safety, Oxfam and other national and local causes. Simultaneously, he took a close interest in politics, serving the Liberal Party with characteristic enthusiasm for over thirty years.

Despite all this, he has still found time to travel very widely and that innate power of observation—and a

strong streak of idealism—quickened his interest in world poverty and world problems. The more he saw, the more he became aware of the inter-dependence of people everywhere—and the more convinced he became that failure to recognise this inter-dependence was the cause of most of the social, economic and political evils of the world.

(This theme—that it is Mankind's destiny to work together for the common good—has indeed been a feature of two of his finest series: the 'police procedural' GIDEONs and the later WESTs.)

It was a natural step for him to apply his beliefs to the British scene. And almost single-handed, he started a political movement—All Party Alliance—the purpose of which is to get the best men from all the parties working together in government. It is characteristic of Creasey that he spends a very large proportion of his income on this movement, besides publishing* a monthly journal—*APA News*—in an effort to spread the ideas in which he believes and by which he works and lives.

* From 19 Coton Road, Nuneaton, Warwicks.

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